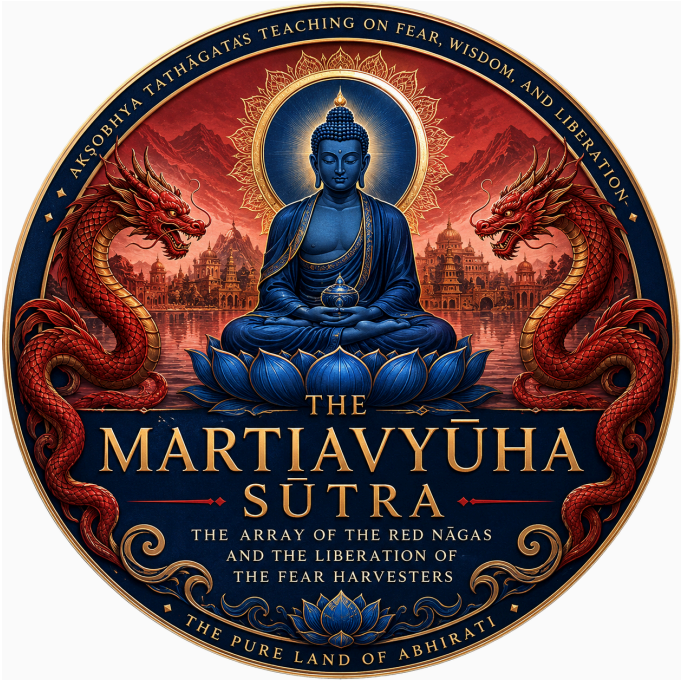
The Martiavyūha Sūtra
PART 1

The Array of the Red Nāgas and the Liberation of the Fear Harvesters



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Akshobhya Buddha

Bodhisattva Mātaṅgī-Min-Hapi

Reverend Moshe Reed, Servant and Prophet of Logos

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all beings who strive to transform fear into wisdom, anger into compassion, and confusion into clarity.

To those who walk difficult roads with steadfast hearts.

To the seekers who refuse despair, the teachers who quietly illuminate the path, the healers who mend unseen wounds, and the practitioners who cultivate kindness even when no one is watching.

May these pages remind every reader that no being is beyond redemption, no mistake beyond repentance, and no world beyond renewal.

May those burdened by suffering discover courage.

May those consumed by hatred awaken to understanding.

May those lost in uncertainty find the still mirror of wisdom within their own minds.

And above all, may this book inspire the arising of **bodhicitta**—the boundless resolve to seek awakening not for oneself alone, but for the liberation and welfare of all sentient beings throughout the ten directions.

May all who encounter these words plant the causes for rebirth in the Pure Land of Abhirati under the guidance

of the Blessed Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and may they return again and again until every being is established in peace, wisdom, and fearless compassion.

May all beings be happy.
May all beings be free from suffering.
May all beings realize their innate capacity for awakening.
May all attain unsurpassed, complete, and perfect Buddhahood.

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The mind that remembers Akṣobhya becomes steady; the heart that generates Bodhicitta becomes vast; the one who realizes Suchness enters the Realm of Delight and works unceasingly for the awakening of all beings.

Homage

Namo Akṣobhyāya Buddhāya.

Homage to Akṣobhya Tathāgata,
Lord of Imperturbable Suchness,
Mirror-Like Wisdom of the Ten Directions,
Illuminator of Abhirati,
Guide of Bodhisattvas,
Refuge of gods, humans, nāgas, and all wandering beings.

Homage to the Dharma,
Unborn and unceasing,
Neither coming nor going,
Neither one nor many,
The luminous Suchness dwelling within all beings.

Homage to the Saṅgha,
The noble assembly of bodhisattvas and sages,
Who cross the ocean of becoming
And lead countless beings to liberation.

May all who hear this scripture
Generate bodhicitta.
May all who wander in fear
Awaken to fear's emptiness.
May all who dwell in darkness
Discover the radiance of the Dharma.
May all beings attain rebirth in Abhirati,
The Pure Land of Imperturbable Suchness.

Thus begins the sacred history known as:

THE MARTIAVYŪHA SŪTRA

The Array of the Red Nāgas and the Liberation of the Fear Harvesters

A Revelation of the Adamantine Path of Imperturbable Suchness.

The Assembly in Abhirati

Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One Akṣobhya, the Tathāgata, Arhat, Perfectly Awakened Buddha, dwelt in the eastern Buddha-field known as Abhirati.

That realm was adorned with inconceivable virtues.

The ground was composed of sapphire and lapis lazuli, smooth and level, free from mountains and valleys. Jewel trees extended for hundreds of leagues, their branches hung with bells that proclaimed the Dharma whenever touched by gentle winds.

Rivers of fragrant waters flowed through the Pure Land, producing melodies of impermanence, compassion, emptiness, and liberation.

Lotuses the size of chariots bloomed throughout the land.
Their petals shone with colors unknown to ordinary worlds.

The sky emitted neither excessive brightness nor darkness but a radiance perfectly suited to contemplation.

There existed no hell-beings there.

No hungry ghosts.

No demonic realms.

No cries of hatred.

No sounds of warfare.

No fear.

No oppression.

No domination.

All beings who dwelt there cultivated wisdom and compassion.

At that time the Blessed One sat beneath the Great Bodhi Tree of Crystal Awareness.

His body radiated immeasurable light.

From every pore emerged countless worlds.

Within every world appeared countless Buddhas.

Within every Buddha-field appeared innumerable assemblies.

And within every assembly the Dharma was being taught.

Around the Blessed One gathered an immeasurable congregation.

There were bodhisattvas equal in number to the sands of the Ganges.

There were great nāga kings who had abandoned pride.

There were devas from celestial realms.

There were arhats liberated from defilements.

There were goddesses of wisdom.

There were guardians of Buddha-fields.

There were beings from worlds never known among humans.

All had assembled to hear the Dharma.

Among them sat the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati, Ocean of Wisdom.

His mind was vast and tranquil.

His compassion extended throughout innumerable world-systems.

His body shone with the marks of great merit accumulated through countless kalpas.

While seated within meditation he perceived a distant realm among the immeasurable world-systems.

That realm appeared crimson.

Its karmic history was troubled.

Great ignorance had arisen there.

Yet hidden within its darkness he perceived seeds of future awakening.

Seeing this, compassion stirred within him.

Rising from his seat, he arranged his robe over one shoulder and bowed before the Blessed One.

Then he spoke.

"World-Honored One, throughout the ten directions there are countless worlds.

Some flourish through wisdom.

Some decline through ignorance.

Some become fields of awakening.

Others become prisons fashioned by craving.

In my meditation I have perceived a distant realm known among the devas as Raktaloka, the Crimson World.

Its history is strange.

Its inhabitants possess great powers yet remain trapped in delusion.

Some call them the Red Nāgas.

Some call them the Serpent Kings.

Others know nothing of them at all.

Blessed One, for the benefit of future beings, please explain the origin of that world, the rise of its peoples, their fall into domination, and their eventual liberation."

When Sāgaramati had spoken these words, the entire assembly became silent.

Even the jewel trees ceased their music.

Even the celestial birds paused their songs.

All wished to hear the answer.

The Blessed One smiled.

From his smile emerged rays of light illuminating countless Buddha-fields.

Those rays traveled through innumerable universes before returning and entering the crown of the Buddha's head.

Witnessing this sign, the venerable assembly understood that a profound teaching was about to be revealed.

Then the Blessed Akṣobhya addressed Sāgaramati.

"Excellent, excellent.

You ask not for your own benefit but for the liberation of beings.

Listen carefully.

Long ago, beyond the reckoning of ordinary minds, there existed a world-system called Raktaloka, the Crimson Realm.

Its story reveals the rise of ignorance and the triumph of awakening.

It demonstrates how even great powers cannot overcome suffering.

It shows how Buddha-Nature remains present even within those who seem furthest from liberation.

Listen well.

I shall explain."

The Question of the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati

Then the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, if all beings possess Buddha-Nature, how could the inhabitants of the Crimson Realm fall into such profound delusion?

How could those endowed with psychic powers become servants of ignorance?

How could wisdom become distorted into domination?

How could fear arise where Buddha-Nature was present from the beginning?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, consider a great crystal jewel.

Though perfectly transparent, it may become covered with dust.

The dust does not alter the jewel's nature.

Yet until the dust is removed, its brilliance remains concealed.

Likewise, Buddha-Nature remains untouched by ignorance.

Yet ignorance obscures its radiance.

The beings of the Crimson Realm were not deprived of awakening.

Rather, they became fascinated by power.

They discovered subtle abilities before discovering wisdom.

They learned mastery before humility.

They learned influence before compassion.

Thus they mistook shadows for reality."

Sāgaramati then asked:

"World-Honored One, what was the root of their error?"

The Blessed One answered:

"The root was the ancient conceit:

'I am.'

From this conceit arose comparison.

From comparison arose superiority.

From superiority arose domination.

From domination arose fear.

From fear arose suffering.

From suffering arose further delusion.

Thus the wheel continued to turn."

The Buddha then uttered these verses:

Mind creates worlds.
Mind destroys worlds.

From grasping arises bondage.
From wisdom arises freedom.

A king who conquers a thousand realms
Yet fails to conquer himself
Remains a prisoner.

One who conquers attachment
Though possessing nothing
Is greater than celestial rulers.

Power without wisdom
Becomes a chain.

Knowledge without compassion
Becomes a weapon.

Psychic abilities without awakening
Become causes of further rebirth.

Therefore cultivate wisdom first.
Compassion second.
Power last.

Or better still:
Seek wisdom and compassion,
And let power arise only as a servant.

When the Blessed One finished speaking, many bodhisattvas attained deeper realization of emptiness.

Many devas generated bodhicitta.

Many nāga kings remembered their former vows.

Then the Blessed One declared:

"Listen carefully.

I shall now explain the formation of the Crimson Realm, the arising of the Two Nāga Peoples, the flowering of their civilization, the corruption of their minds, and the ultimate triumph of the Dharma.

This teaching is called:

The Martiavyūha,
The Array of the Red Nāgas,
The Revelation of Fear's Emptiness,
The Chronicle of the Crimson World,
The Liberation of the Fear Harvesters.

Those who hear it with faith shall accumulate immeasurable merit.

Those who understand it shall perceive the subtle workings of karma.

Those who practice according to its meaning shall progress toward awakening.

And those who dedicate its merit toward rebirth in Abhirati shall never be abandoned by the Compassion of the Tathāgatas."

Thus the introduction was completed.

The assembly rejoiced.

They bowed before Akṣobhya Buddha and prepared to hear the account of the origin of the Crimson Realm.

Book I — The Origin of the Red World

Chapter 1

The Formation of the Crimson Sphere

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his teaching before the assembly gathered in Abhirati.

"Sāgaramati, listen carefully and retain these words in your heart.

Long ago, beyond the reckoning of ordinary beings, beyond the memory of gods and humans, there occurred the ending of a great cosmic age.

World-systems without number entered dissolution.

Mountains crumbled.

Oceans vanished.

Stars disappeared.

The heavens of desire were emptied.

The realms of form trembled.

Even the abodes of mighty devas could not escape impermanence.

For all conditioned phenomena are subject to arising and ceasing.

When the causes supporting them are exhausted, they pass away.

This is the Dharma of all compounded things.

Yet, Sāgaramati, understand this clearly:

Though worlds perish, karma does not perish.

Though mountains collapse, intentions remain.

Though suns grow dark, the streams of consciousness continue.

Just as travelers leave one city and enter another, beings depart from one world-system and arise within another according to their karma.

Thus, after the dissolution of that former age, countless streams of consciousness wandered through the vastness of saṃsāra.

Some were luminous.

Some were clouded.

Some were drawn toward wisdom.

Others were drawn toward power.

All carried the seeds of future destinies.

Then, through the convergence of immeasurable causes and conditions, there appeared a new world-system in the eastern reaches of the cosmos.

The devas called it Raktaloka.

The Crimson Realm.

Not because it was created by a god.

Not because it was fashioned by chance.

But because the karmic tendencies of its future inhabitants resonated with the element of fire and the color red.

As these karmic streams converged, the world-system gradually unfolded.

First appeared the winds.

These were not ordinary winds.

They were the elemental winds described by the Buddhas, the subtle forces through which worlds arise and pass away.

For many kalpas they moved through empty space.

Then appeared the waters.

These waters spread throughout the region of the new world-system.

For many ages nothing existed but vast oceans illuminated by crimson light.

Then appeared the earth element.

From the waters emerged great continents and islands.

Mountains rose.

Valleys formed.

Crystal caverns developed beneath the ground.

The world matured.

The devas who observed these events marveled greatly.

One deva asked another:

'What beings shall be born here?'

The second replied:

'Only karma knows.'

The Blessed One then said:

"Sāgaramati, understand that no world appears without purpose.

Each world becomes a field for the ripening of karma.

Some worlds produce sages.

Some produce warriors.

Some produce merchants.

Some become places where great bodhisattvas emerge.

Others become places where delusion reaches extraordinary heights.

Yet all are classrooms within the great school of awakening."

As the Crimson Realm developed, vast oceans covered much of its surface.

The waters were clear and deep.

Beneath them grew forests of crystal coral.

Immense luminous creatures moved through the depths.

Many devas compared those oceans to liquid jewels.

The skies above shone with a perpetual red radiance.

At dawn they appeared crimson.

At noon they appeared ruby-colored.

At dusk they resembled fields of molten gold.

The world possessed extraordinary beauty.

Yet beauty itself became one of the conditions for future attachment.

For beings who delight in appearances often forget their impermanent nature.

The Blessed One paused.

Then he asked the assembly:

"What is the fate of all beautiful things?"

The assembly replied:

"They pass away, World-Honored One."

"What is the fate of all powerful things?"

"They pass away, World-Honored One."

"What is the fate of all worlds?"

"They pass away, World-Honored One."

The Blessed One nodded.

"Excellent.

Remember this throughout the teaching.

The tragedy of the Red Nāgas began because they forgot this truth."

At that time countless beings dwelling in Abhirati entered meditative absorption.

Through the Buddha's power they witnessed the formation of Raktaloka.

They saw oceans stretching beyond horizons.

They saw mountains composed of crimson crystal.

They saw rivers shining like liquid gemstones.

They saw forests of towering vegetation unlike any found within the Sahā World.

Many were astonished.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, were living beings already present during this time?"

The Buddha replied:

"Not yet.

The world was still being prepared.

Just as a farmer prepares a field before planting seeds, karma was preparing the conditions necessary for future births."

Then the Blessed One revealed a profound teaching.

"Sāgaramati, there are no accidental births.

Every realm attracts beings whose karmic tendencies resonate with it.

A world of violence attracts those attached to violence.

A heavenly realm attracts those attached to pleasure.

A Pure Land attracts those devoted to awakening.

Likewise, the Crimson Realm attracted beings possessing unusual combinations of wisdom and pride, insight and ambition, contemplation and desire.

These karmic tendencies had been cultivated over countless lives.

Therefore the future inhabitants of that realm would possess extraordinary abilities.

Yet they would also face extraordinary dangers."

The assembly listened carefully.

The Buddha continued:

"Among the countless streams of consciousness approaching rebirth there were many who had once practiced meditation.

Many had attained concentration.

Many had acquired supernatural powers.

Yet few had completed the path to liberation.

Because of this imbalance, the Crimson Realm would become fertile ground for the cultivation of psychic abilities.

But psychic powers without wisdom are dangerous.

A sharp sword in the hands of a child creates suffering.

A powerful mind ruled by ego creates even greater suffering."

Then the Blessed One spoke in verse:

Meditation without wisdom
Is a lamp without sight.

Power without compassion
Is a river without banks.

Knowledge without humility
Becomes a prison.

Those who seek mastery of others
Remain slaves to themselves.

But those who seek mastery of the mind
Approach the shore of liberation.

As the kalpas continued, conditions ripened.

The oceans became rich with life.

Invisible organisms multiplied.

Plants emerged.

Creatures appeared.

The great wheel of biological existence began turning.

Birth followed birth.

Death followed death.

Consciousness entered new forms.

Karma unfolded according to its nature.

Throughout these ages, great nāga kings dwelling in neighboring world-systems observed the development of the Crimson Realm.

Some predicted that it would become a realm of wisdom.

Others predicted that it would become a realm of conflict.

Still others remained silent.

For the future cannot be known completely even by gods.

Only a Buddha perceives the full web of causes and conditions.

Then, after vast stretches of time, signs began to appear.

Certain streams of consciousness possessing strong karmic affinities toward serpentine forms gathered near the world.

These beings had once lived as nāgas.

Others had lived as humans obsessed with knowledge.

Others had been devas attached to psychic attainments.

Others had been ascetics who sought power more than wisdom.

Together they approached rebirth.

Seeing this, celestial beings understood that a new chapter in the history of Raktaloka was beginning.

The Blessed One said:

"Sāgaramati, these streams of consciousness would eventually give rise to the peoples later known as the Red Nāgas.

Yet at this time they possessed neither kingdoms nor armies.

Neither pride nor domination.

Neither fear-harvesting nor hidden empires.

Like all beings, they began in innocence.

Remember this well.

No being is born evil.

Delusion develops gradually.

Attachment develops gradually.

Ignorance develops gradually.

Likewise, wisdom develops gradually.

Compassion develops gradually.

Awakening develops gradually.

The future tyrant and the future bodhisattva both begin as ordinary beings."

Upon hearing these words, many bodhisattvas attained deeper understanding concerning the universality of Buddha-Nature.

For they perceived that even those destined to fall into great darkness retained the possibility of enlightenment.

Then the Blessed One declared:

"The field has been prepared.

The oceans have matured.

The karmic streams have gathered.

Soon there shall arise the first great peoples of the Crimson Realm.

Listen carefully in the next portion of this teaching, for I shall explain the ancient oceans and the births of the beings who dwelt within them."

When the Blessed One completed this chapter, the assembly rejoiced.

Thousands of celestial flowers descended from the sky.

Nāga kings bowed their heads.

Bodhisattvas praised the Dharma.

And all looked forward to hearing the account of the Ancient Oceans of Raktaloka.

Book I — The Origin of the Red World

Chapter 2

The Oceans of Ancient Raktaloka

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse to the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati and the vast assembly gathered in Abhirati.

"Sāgaramati, after the formation of the Crimson Realm, countless ages passed.

The mountains stood firm.

The skies shone red.

The continents expanded.

Yet the greatest feature of Raktaloka was neither its mountains nor its deserts.

It was the immeasurable oceans.

For in those ancient times nearly the entire world was covered by water.

The seas stretched beyond imagination.

Their depths descended into regions unseen even by the devas who watched from above.

Their surfaces reflected the crimson heavens.

Their currents carried the karmic destinies of countless future beings.

These oceans became the cradle of the first inhabitants of the Red World.

Listen carefully and I shall explain."

Then the Blessed One extended a ray of light from between his brows.

The assembly beheld a vision of ancient Raktaloka.

They saw vast waters extending beyond every horizon.

The oceans shimmered like liquid rubies beneath the red sky.

Immense storms wandered across the seas.

Clouds towered like mountains.

Lightning illuminated the waters.

Yet beneath the turbulence of the surface there existed profound stillness.

There, hidden from ordinary sight, life gradually flourished.

The Buddha said:

"All conditioned things arise from causes and conditions.

When causes gather, phenomena appear.

When causes disperse, phenomena disappear.

Thus the beings of Raktaloka did not arise through creation.

Nor did they arise without cause.

They emerged through karma unfolding according to dependent origination."

For many kalpas the oceans were inhabited only by simple forms of life.

Tiny creatures invisible to ordinary vision multiplied.

They consumed.

They reproduced.

They perished.

Others arose.

The wheel of becoming continued.

As ages passed, more complex forms emerged.

The waters became filled with wondrous beings.

Some possessed luminous bodies.

Some resembled serpents.

Some resembled fish.

Some resembled dragons.

Others had forms unknown in any human world.

The devas who observed these developments often gathered to discuss them.

One deva remarked:

"These beings possess unusual karmic tendencies."

Another replied:

"Their future will be extraordinary."

A third remained silent.

For even the gods could not fully perceive the destinies unfolding.

Then the Blessed One explained:

"Sāgaramati, among the streams of consciousness entering rebirth in these oceans were many former meditators.

These beings had cultivated concentration in previous lives.

Some had attained clairvoyance.

Some had developed telepathic abilities.

Others possessed extraordinary memory.

Yet they had not uprooted ignorance.

Because of this, they carried powerful karmic seeds.

As these seeds matured, unusual forms began to appear."

Among the oceanic creatures there emerged a lineage distinct from all others.

Their bodies were graceful.

Their minds developed quickly.

Their awareness exceeded that of ordinary animals.

Though still bound within saṃsāra, they possessed unusual intelligence.

These beings would later become known as the Jalānāgas, the Water Nāgas.

At first they were simple.

They lived within the deep oceans.

They formed no kingdoms.

They sought no power.

They knew nothing of domination.

Like children they explored the vast waters.

Like travelers they wandered the ocean currents.

Like dreamers they gazed upward toward the crimson sky.

The Buddha paused and asked:

"Sāgaramati, what is the greatest treasure possessed by a young being?"

The Bodhisattva replied:

"Innocence, World-Honored One."

"Excellent," said the Buddha.

"The Jalānāgas possessed innocence.

Though ignorance remained, malice had not yet arisen.

Though desire existed, greed had not yet matured.

Though selfhood was present, pride had not yet become strong.

Therefore the oceans of that age were peaceful."

The assembly rejoiced upon hearing this.

Then the Blessed One continued.

As the Jalānāgas evolved through countless generations, their bodies became increasingly refined.

Their scales reflected the crimson sunlight.

Their eyes perceived subtle movements in water.

Their minds became capable of memory and reflection.

Most remarkable of all, they gradually developed a natural sensitivity to thought.

Long before they possessed spoken language, they could perceive emotions.

Long before they established societies, they could sense intentions.

Long before they built cities, they experienced a primitive form of telepathic communication.

The Buddha explained:

"This ability arose because many among them had cultivated meditative concentration in former lives.

Though they had forgotten those lives, karmic traces remained."

At these words several bodhisattvas nodded in understanding.

For they recognized that spiritual attainments can survive death even when wisdom has not yet fully matured.

The Blessed One continued:

"The Jalānāgas soon discovered that thoughts affected one another.

Peaceful thoughts brought harmony.

Fearful thoughts spread agitation.

Anger disturbed entire groups.

Compassion calmed disturbances.

Thus they learned a profound truth before they possessed words for it:

Mind influences mind."

At first this knowledge produced harmony.

Communities cooperated.

Resources were shared.

Conflicts were resolved quickly.

The oceans flourished.

Many devas praised the virtue of the Water Nāgas.

Some even predicted that they would become a civilization of bodhisattvas.

Yet karma is subtle.

Potential alone does not determine destiny.

Without wisdom, even noble gifts can become causes of suffering.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, if the Water Nāgas possessed harmony, how did decline eventually arise?"

The Buddha replied:

"Not immediately.

Many ages passed before corruption appeared.

First there was beauty.

Then prosperity.

Then achievement.

Only afterward did pride emerge.

Understand this carefully.

Decline rarely begins during hardship.

More often it begins during success."

The assembly reflected deeply upon these words.

Then the Blessed One revealed further visions.

The gathering saw magnificent underwater realms.

Great crystal formations grew beneath the seas.

Caverns filled with radiant minerals.

Forests of coral stretched across ocean floors.

Schools of luminous creatures drifted through vast underwater valleys.

The Jalānāgas wandered among these wonders.

Their civilization slowly advanced.

They learned to shape crystal.

They learned to cultivate luminous plants.

They learned to preserve memory through symbols and patterns.

Their communities expanded.

Their knowledge increased.

Yet despite their progress, they remained largely innocent.

The poison of superiority had not yet entered their hearts.

The Buddha then spoke a verse:

Prosperity is not danger.
Power is not danger.

The true danger
Is attachment to prosperity.

The true danger
Is attachment to power.

The ocean itself is harmless.

But one who mistakes the ocean for permanence
Will eventually drown.

As ages passed, extraordinary phenomena appeared.

Certain Jalānāgas entered deep states of concentration.

While resting motionless within ocean caverns, they perceived distant thoughts.

Some sensed approaching storms before they arrived.

Some communicated across vast distances.

Some beheld memories from former lives.

These abilities astonished their companions.

They were regarded with admiration.

The first sages of the Water Nāgas emerged.

For a time these sages used their abilities wisely.

They guided communities.

They resolved disputes.

They encouraged cooperation.

They taught restraint.

Because of this, the oceans enjoyed a long age of peace.

Yet among the younger generations another tendency appeared.

Some became fascinated not with wisdom but with ability.

They admired power more than virtue.

They praised psychic talents more than compassion.

They sought extraordinary experiences.

The seeds of future pride were being planted.

The Blessed One said:

"Thus the wheel began to turn.

Not yet toward darkness.

Not yet toward suffering.

But toward a crossroads.

For every civilization eventually faces a choice.

Wisdom or power.

Compassion or domination.

Liberation or attachment.

The Water Nāgas had not yet made that choice.

But the conditions leading toward it were beginning to gather."

Then celestial flowers descended throughout Abhirati.

The assembly listened with complete attention.

The Buddha concluded:

"Sāgaramati, remember this chapter well.

The future fear-harvesters were once innocent.

The future tyrants were once children.

The future deceivers were once seekers.

Therefore never despise any being.

The bodhisattva sees not merely what a being is.

The bodhisattva sees what a being may become."

When these words were spoken, countless beings generated great compassion toward all who wander in saṃsāra.

Many attained insight into the universality of Buddha-Nature.

The assembly rejoiced and praised the Blessed One.

Book I — The Origin of the Red World

Chapter 3

The Birth of the Jalānāgas

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue speaking to the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati and the immeasurable assembly gathered within the Pure Land of Abhirati.

"Sāgaramati, the oceans of Raktaloka flourished for many kalpas.

The waters remained clear.

The currents flowed in harmony.

The creatures dwelling within them multiplied according to karma.

Among these beings the lineage later called the Jalānāgas gradually matured.

Their emergence did not occur in a single generation.

Nor was it the work of a creator.

Like all phenomena, it arose through causes and conditions.

Listen carefully."

The Blessed One extended his right hand.

A great lotus of light appeared above the assembly.

Within its petals unfolded visions of ancient Raktaloka.

The assembly beheld immense oceans beneath crimson skies.

Within those waters moved countless living beings.

Some vanished.

Others appeared.

Forms changed continuously.

Life adapted according to conditions.

The Buddha said:

"All beings wander through innumerable forms.

A deva may become a human.

A human may become a nāga.

A nāga may become an animal.

An animal may become a god.

None possess a fixed self.

Only causes and conditions continue.

Thus the streams of consciousness destined to become the Jalānāgas entered appropriate births."

As ages passed, certain oceanic lineages became increasingly capable of awareness.

Their senses sharpened.

Their memories lengthened.

Their social bonds deepened.

Most importantly, they developed a remarkable sensitivity to the mental states of others.

At first this sensitivity manifested only as intuition.

A parent sensed danger approaching offspring.

A companion perceived the sorrow of another.

Communities detected disturbances before predators arrived.

These abilities aided survival.

But they also reflected karmic inheritances from previous lives.

For many among them had once practiced meditation.

Though their wisdom had not yet matured, traces of concentration remained.

These traces blossomed as unusual faculties.

The Blessed One then declared:

"Understand this well.

Spiritual attainments are not liberation.

Psychic abilities are not enlightenment.

Visions are not awakening.

One may possess extraordinary powers and still remain trapped in saṃsāra."

Hearing these words, many bodhisattvas nodded.

For they recognized the profound distinction between power and wisdom.

Then the Buddha continued.

As generations passed, the Jalānāgas developed increasingly refined forms.

Their bodies became long and graceful.

Their skin displayed intricate patterns resembling precious stones.

Their eyes reflected subtle colors hidden from ordinary sight.

They could remain beneath water for long periods.

They could travel immense distances through ocean currents.

Their lifespans increased.

Their intelligence expanded.

Eventually they became fully self-aware.

They contemplated existence.

They wondered about death.

They pondered the stars.

They questioned the nature of dreams.

Thus philosophy arose among them.

The first sages appeared.

Some taught harmony.

Some taught moderation.

Some encouraged contemplation of impermanence.

Though they did not yet possess the complete Dharma,
fragments of truth began to emerge.

One ancient sage taught:

"All waves return to the sea."

Another declared:

"That which arises also passes."

Another said:

"The one who conquers anger is greater than the one who conquers enemies."

These teachings accumulated merit.

Many Jalānāgas followed them.

For a long period their civilization developed peacefully.

The assembly then witnessed through the Buddha's vision immense underwater settlements.

Crystal formations were shaped into dwellings.

Luminous plants illuminated public chambers.

Great halls were carved within coral mountains.

Communities flourished.

Families prospered.

Art, music, and learning appeared.

Many devas rejoiced.

One celestial king proclaimed:

"Surely these beings will become guardians of wisdom."

But another deva remained silent.

For he perceived subtle shadows gathering within the future.

The Buddha then explained:

"Sāgaramati, every civilization carries both virtue and danger within itself.

A healthy tree contains the possibility of decay.

A clear lake contains the possibility of disturbance.

Likewise, the Jalānāgas possessed both noble qualities and hidden weaknesses."

"What weaknesses, Blessed One?" asked Sāgaramati.

The Buddha replied:

"They admired excellence.

This is not harmful.

But gradually admiration transformed into attachment.

Attachment transformed into comparison.

Comparison transformed into pride.

Pride transformed into division.

Thus the seeds of suffering were planted."

At first the changes were small.

Certain sages received greater honor than others.

Certain families gained greater influence.

Certain communities became famous for psychic accomplishments.

People began comparing themselves.

Some considered themselves superior.

Others felt inferior.

Still others became envious.

These tendencies remained subtle.

Most failed to recognize them.

Yet karma was already unfolding.

The Blessed One spoke a verse:

A mountain begins as grains of sand.

A river begins as drops of rain.

A forest begins as a seed.

Likewise suffering begins
With unnoticed thoughts.

The fool ignores small causes
And fears great consequences.

The wise examine beginnings
Before endings appear.

The Jalānāgas nevertheless continued to prosper.

Their understanding of telepathic communication expanded.

They learned to share memories.

They learned to exchange emotions.

They learned to coordinate collective projects through mental cooperation.

Their cities became increasingly sophisticated.

Knowledge spread rapidly.

For a time this produced harmony.

Misunderstandings diminished.

Conflicts became rare.

Many believed their civilization had surpassed all dangers.

This belief itself became another source of danger.

The Buddha said:

"When beings believe themselves immune to error, error has already entered."

Then a remarkable event occurred.

Among the Jalānāgas there arose a sage known as Suvarṇacitta, Golden Mind.

Through profound concentration he recovered memories of previous lives.

He remembered heavenly realms.

He remembered human realms.

He remembered suffering.

He remembered death.

He remembered countless rebirths.

Deeply moved, he began teaching impermanence.

He urged the people:

'Do not cling to power.

Do not cling to beauty.

Do not cling to longevity.

All conditioned things pass away.'

Many listened.

Yet many ignored him.

For prosperity often dulls the perception of danger.

Suvarṇacitta became the first great prophet of impermanence within Raktaloka.

Though honored by some, his warnings were largely forgotten.

The assembly grew solemn upon hearing this.

For they recognized the pattern repeated throughout countless worlds.

The Buddha then continued.

As the ages advanced, environmental changes slowly transformed portions of the Crimson Realm.

Certain seas receded.

New coastlines emerged.

Islands became continents.

Previously isolated communities encountered one another.

Exploration increased.

Travel expanded.

New opportunities appeared.

Among the explorers arose individuals possessing strong ambition.

Unlike the ancient sages, they sought achievement rather than understanding.

Discovery rather than wisdom.

Influence rather than humility.

These ambitions were not yet destructive.

Yet they pointed toward a future crossroads.

The Buddha declared:

"Sāgaramati, karma unfolds gradually.

No civilization falls in a day.

No civilization reaches enlightenment in a day.

Every destiny is woven from countless intentions."

Then the Blessed One revealed another vision.

The assembly saw distant deserts emerging beyond the oceans.

Great red plains stretched beneath the crimson heavens.

Mountain ranges rose from the sands.

Hidden caverns formed beneath the earth.

The Buddha said:

"In those regions another lineage would eventually arise.

Their destiny would become intertwined with the Water Nāgas.

Together they would shape the future of Raktaloka."

Sāgaramati understood that the Buddha referred to the future Desert Nāgas.

Yet he remained silent and listened.

The Blessed One concluded:

"The Jalānāgas possessed intelligence, longevity, cooperation, and psychic gifts.

These were blessings.

Yet they had not realized emptiness.

They had not uprooted conceit.

They had not fully understood suffering.

Therefore they remained vulnerable.

Their greatest challenge would not come from enemies.

It would arise from their own minds.

Remember this teaching.

For the most dangerous serpent is not found in forests or oceans.

It dwells within ignorance itself."

When these words were spoken, many beings in the assembly attained deeper insight into dependent origination.

Some entered meditative absorption.

Some generated bodhicitta for the first time.

All praised the wisdom of the Tathāgata.

Book I — The Origin of the Red World

Chapter 4

The Rise of the Desert Nāgas

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue the sacred discourse before the great assembly in Abhirati.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati, together with countless bodhisattvas, nāga kings, devas, and arhats, listened attentively as the World-Honored One revealed the ancient history of Raktaloka.

The Blessed One said:

"Sāgaramati, while the Jalānāgas flourished within the vast oceans of the Crimson Realm, another destiny was ripening elsewhere.

Far beyond the seas lay immense regions of red stone and crimson sand.

Great deserts stretched beneath the sky.

The winds moved across them like wandering spirits.

Towering mountains cast long shadows over endless plains.

Beneath those mountains existed vast caverns adorned with crystal formations that shone from within.

These hidden regions would become the birthplace of another people."

Then the Blessed One caused a vision to appear.

The assembly beheld the deserts of ancient Raktaloka.

Unlike the peaceful oceans, these lands were harsh.

Water was scarce.

Temperatures shifted dramatically.

Powerful storms swept across the sands.

Survival required endurance.

The Buddha said:

"Different environments nurture different tendencies.

The oceans encouraged cooperation.

The deserts encouraged resilience.

The seas taught interdependence.

The wilderness taught self-reliance.

Neither path was inherently superior.

Yet each produced distinct karmic patterns."

Within those deserts lived many forms of life.

Some burrowed beneath the sands.

Some nested within caverns.

Some survived by gathering moisture hidden beneath stone.

Generation after generation, life adapted.

Consciousness entered suitable forms according to karma.

Among these beings there gradually emerged another extraordinary lineage.

These future people possessed strong bodies.

Their scales were darker than those of the Jalānāgas.

Their eyes were adapted to the bright deserts.

Their minds developed remarkable focus.

Though fewer in number than the Water Nāgas, they possessed extraordinary determination.

They would later become known as the Vajrāṅga Nāgas, the Adamant-Scaled Nāgas.

The assembly observed their earliest ancestors moving across the red wilderness.

The Blessed One explained:

"Many among these beings carried karmic tendencies different from those of the Jalānāgas.

In previous lives they had been warriors, explorers, rulers, and seekers of mastery.

They possessed courage.

They possessed discipline.

Yet many also carried subtle attachments to achievement and distinction."

Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, did they possess Buddha-Nature as fully as the Water Nāgas?"

The Blessed One smiled.

"Sāgaramati, your question reveals compassion.

Listen carefully.

The Buddha-Nature of a king is not greater than the Buddha-Nature of a beggar.

The Buddha-Nature of a nāga is not greater than the Buddha-Nature of a human.

The Buddha-Nature of a deva is not greater than the Buddha-Nature of an insect.

Suchness does not increase.

Suchness does not decrease.

Only the obscurations differ."

The assembly rejoiced.

Many gained insight into non-discrimination.

Then the Blessed One continued.

The early Desert Nāgas faced constant hardship.

Unlike the peoples of the oceans, they could not depend upon abundance.

Food required effort.

Water required skill.

Shelter required labor.

As a result, they developed qualities of persistence and discipline.

Children learned responsibility from a young age.

Communities depended upon cooperation.

Leaders were chosen for competence rather than inheritance.

For many ages these customs produced harmony.

The Desert Nāgas became respected for their honesty and endurance.

The devas often praised them.

Some heavenly beings declared:

"Among the peoples of Raktaloka, these are the most steadfast."

Yet another deva replied:

"Steadfastness can become rigidity.

Discipline can become pride.

Strength can become domination.

Let us not judge too quickly."

The Blessed One nodded.

"Indeed.

Every virtue possesses a shadow when wisdom is absent."

As generations passed, the Desert Nāgas began exploring the crystal caverns beneath the mountains.

There they discovered immense formations unlike anything known among the oceans.

Crystal towers rose from cavern floors.

Luminous minerals illuminated entire subterranean valleys.

Some chambers extended for hundreds of leagues.

Others contained mysterious resonances.

When sounds were made within them, echoes persisted for long periods.

Certain sages discovered that concentrated thought influenced these crystals.

Emotions produced subtle vibrations.

Intentions altered their luminosity.

Meditation generated harmonious patterns.

The Desert Nāgas became fascinated.

They devoted themselves to studying these phenomena.

Thus emerged the first Crystal Sages.

These sages entered prolonged meditations within the caverns.

Through concentration they learned to perceive subtle energies.

Some communicated over great distances.

Some recovered fragments of previous lives.

Some sensed approaching events before they occurred.

Their abilities astonished their people.

The Blessed One said:

"Sāgaramati, this was the second great turning point in the history of Raktaloka.

The Jalānāgas had discovered the influence of mind through communion.

The Desert Nāgas discovered the influence of mind through concentration.

Both paths contained potential.

Both paths contained danger."

One among the Crystal Sages became renowned throughout the deserts.

His name was Vajramanas, Adamant Mind.

Through deep meditation he perceived a profound truth.

He taught:

"The mind shapes experience.

Attachment creates suffering.

Anger creates bondage.

Compassion creates harmony."

Many followed him.

Communities flourished.

Violence remained rare.

Wisdom increased.

For a long period, the Desert Nāgas appeared destined for greatness.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, why did these sages not attain liberation?"

The Buddha answered:

"They perceived fragments of truth.

Yet fragments are not completion.

One may glimpse a mountain without reaching its summit.

One may hear of a distant city without arriving there.

Likewise they understood aspects of mind, yet lacked the complete Dharma of the Buddhas."

The assembly contemplated this deeply.

Then the Blessed One revealed another vision.

The Desert Nāgas had begun constructing magnificent settlements within the crystal caverns.

Entire cities emerged beneath the mountains.

Crystal pillars supported vast halls.

Roadways connected distant chambers.

Meditation sanctuaries filled the subterranean realm.

Knowledge accumulated.

Art flourished.

Science advanced.

The civilization expanded rapidly.

Yet beneath this prosperity another tendency slowly emerged.

Those who mastered the crystals gained prestige.

Those who demonstrated unusual abilities gained influence.

Recognition became desirable.

Achievement became admired.

Comparison quietly entered society.

The Buddha said:

"Understand this carefully.

Pride rarely enters through obvious doors.

It enters disguised as excellence.

It enters disguised as accomplishment.

It enters disguised as virtue.

The poison appears sweet before it reveals itself."

Then he spoke these verses:

A poisonous vine
May bear beautiful flowers.

A chain of gold
Remains a chain.

The desire to be superior
Appears noble to the ignorant.

Yet superiority and inferiority
Arise together.

Where one exists,
The other follows.

Neither leads to freedom.

As the centuries passed, the Desert Nāgas became increasingly aware of the existence of the Jalānāgas.

Stories traveled between regions.

Travelers returned with tales of vast oceanic cities.

The Water Nāgas likewise heard reports of crystal kingdoms beneath the mountains.

Curiosity grew.

Interest increased.

Both peoples wondered about the other.

At first these thoughts were friendly.

Explorers wished to exchange knowledge.

Sages wished to compare discoveries.

Artists wished to witness foreign wonders.

Yet among a few ambitious individuals another thought appeared.

"Perhaps our people are greater."

Though faint, this thought possessed tremendous karmic power.

For from a single comparison entire ages of suffering may eventually arise.

The Blessed One then looked throughout the assembly.

His gaze was serene and penetrating.

"Remember this, Sāgaramati.

The future fear empire did not begin with armies.

It did not begin with deception.

It did not begin with conquest.

It began with a thought.

A single thought.

'I am greater.'

From that seed an entire forest of suffering would grow."

When these words were spoken, many beings throughout the assembly trembled.

For they recognized traces of the same conceit within themselves.

Some immediately generated humility.

Some deepened their meditation.

Some renewed their bodhisattva vows.

Then celestial flowers descended from the sky of Abhirati.

The jewel trees sang melodies of impermanence.

The assembly bowed before the Blessed One.

Book I — The Origin of the Red World

Chapter 5

The Covenant of the Two Serpent Peoples

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly in Abhirati.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati sat respectfully before the World-Honored One, surrounded by bodhisattvas from countless Buddha-fields.

All listened attentively.

The Blessed One said:

"Sāgaramati, after many ages had passed, the Jalānāgas of the oceans and the Vajrāṅga Nāgas of the deserts became increasingly aware of one another.

Rumors traveled across the world.

Merchants spoke of distant civilizations.

Explorers returned with marvelous stories.

Sages exchanged accounts of wonders unseen.

Thus curiosity arose."

At first only fragments of knowledge passed between them.

The Ocean Nāgas heard tales of crystal cities hidden beneath mountains.

The Desert Nāgas heard of luminous kingdoms beneath the seas.

Many regarded such stories as legends.

Others became eager to investigate.

Eventually there arose among the Jalānāgas a renowned navigator named Ratnasāgara, Jewel Ocean.

He possessed extraordinary intelligence and great courage.

From youth he had dreamed of discovering what lay beyond the horizons.

Gathering companions, he set forth upon a journey unlike any undertaken before.

At the same time, among the Vajrāṅga Nāgas there lived a Crystal Sage named Vajradṛṣṭi, Adamant Vision.

He too felt drawn toward the unknown.

While meditating within the deepest crystal chambers, he repeatedly perceived visions of vast oceans and shining cities beneath the waters.

Recognizing these visions as significant, he assembled explorers and began his own expedition.

Thus karma brought them together.

The Buddha paused.

Then he said:

"Beings often imagine history is guided solely by rulers and armies.

This is not so.

Often entire ages turn because of a few sincere seekers.

Had Ratnasāgara remained at home, events would have differed.

Had Vajradṛṣṭi ignored his visions, events would have differed.

The future is shaped through innumerable causes."

The assembly reflected deeply upon these words.

The Blessed One continued.

After many months of travel, the two expeditions encountered one another upon the shores of a great inland sea.

Both groups were astonished.

Never before had they seen beings so similar and yet so different.

The Ocean Nāgas possessed graceful forms shaped by life within the waters.

Their scales reflected subtle colors.

Their movements flowed like currents.

The Desert Nāgas possessed powerful frames.

Their scales resembled polished stone.

Their eyes reflected the discipline of the crystal kingdoms.

For a time both groups remained cautious.

Neither knew the intentions of the other.

Then Ratnasāgara stepped forward.

He bowed respectfully.

Vajradṛṣṭi returned the gesture.

Neither sought dominance.

Neither displayed hostility.

Thus the first meeting occurred in peace.

The Buddha declared:

"Sāgaramati, never underestimate the merit of a respectful greeting.

Many wars have begun through arrogance.

Many conflicts have ended through humility."

Then the Blessed One spoke a verse:

One bow may accomplish
What ten thousand weapons cannot.

One act of respect
May prevent generations of suffering.

The proud create enemies.
The humble discover friends.

Thus the wise cultivate reverence.

Following their meeting, the explorers exchanged knowledge.

The Ocean Nāgas described their underwater cities.

The Desert Nāgas described their crystal caverns.

Each was amazed by the accomplishments of the other.

Neither civilization had developed alone.

Each possessed strengths lacking in the other.

The Jalānāgas excelled in communication, cooperation, and emotional understanding.

The Vajrāṅga Nāgas excelled in discipline, engineering, and concentrated meditation.

Soon mutual admiration arose.

Messengers were sent.

Invitations exchanged.

Great assemblies convened.

Over time delegations traveled regularly between ocean and desert.

Friendships developed.

Trade flourished.

Knowledge spread.

The Buddha then revealed a vision.

The assembly saw thousands of Nāgas journeying across Raktaloka.

Caravans crossed deserts.

Ships traversed inland seas.

Pilgrims visited distant cities.

Sages gathered to discuss philosophy.

Artists shared their creations.

Healers exchanged remedies.

For the first time, the peoples of the Crimson Realm began thinking of themselves as participants in a common destiny.

The Blessed One said:

"Thus arose one of the most virtuous periods in the history of Raktaloka.

Cooperation replaced isolation.

Curiosity overcame suspicion.

Generosity diminished fear."

Hearing this, many devas rejoiced.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, did they establish formal agreements?"

The Buddha replied:

"They did."

At that time leaders, sages, and elders from both civilizations gathered at a place known as the Plain of Two Horizons.

There the oceans met the deserts.

There the winds of sea and sand mingled.

There the first great covenant was established.

Representatives from every major community attended.

The gathering endured for many months.

Discussions were held.

Differences were explored.

Concerns were addressed.

Eventually a sacred agreement emerged.

It became known as the Covenant of the Two Serpent Peoples.

The covenant declared:

'Let neither people seek mastery over the other.

Let knowledge be shared.

Let travelers be welcomed.

Let disputes be settled through dialogue.

Let wisdom be honored above power.

Let compassion guide strength.

Let future generations remember that all beings arise through interdependence.'

The assembly in Abhirati praised these words.

Many recognized their similarity to Dharma principles.

The Buddha smiled.

"Indeed.

Though they lacked the full teaching of the Buddhas, they were moving toward truth."

Then the Blessed One continued.

For many centuries the covenant prospered.

Joint academies were established.

Crystal sages studied alongside ocean philosophers.

Great libraries were created.

Knowledge expanded rapidly.

Advances in meditation, healing, architecture, and communication transformed civilization.

Many predicted that Raktaloka would become one of the most enlightened realms within its region of the cosmos.

Even celestial beings began visiting the world more frequently.

Some devas offered inspiration.

Some nāga kings shared teachings.

Merit accumulated throughout the land.

Yet the Buddha's expression grew solemn.

"Sāgaramati, understand this carefully.

The period of greatest danger often arrives after the period of greatest success."

The Bodhisattva listened attentively.

The Buddha continued.

As prosperity increased, admiration gradually transformed into competition.

Not everywhere.

Not among everyone.

But among a few.

Certain scholars wished to be regarded as the greatest.

Certain sages desired recognition.

Certain leaders sought prestige.

Comparison slowly returned.

The old seeds planted in previous generations began to sprout.

The Jalānāgas admired their mastery of collective thought.

The Vajrāṅga Nāgas admired their mastery of concentration.

Some began asking:

"Which path is superior?"

At first these discussions remained friendly.

Yet subtle attachments emerged.

The need to excel.

The desire to be praised.

The wish to be remembered.

These are small seeds.

Yet from small seeds grow vast forests.

The Blessed One then spoke:

When harmony flourishes,
Guard the mind.

When prosperity flourishes,
Guard the mind.

When wisdom flourishes,
Guard the mind.

For Māra enters not only through suffering.

He also enters through success.

The assembly became silent.

Many reflected upon their own subtle attachments.

The Buddha continued.

Despite these emerging tendencies, the covenant remained strong.

Generations grew up knowing cooperation rather than conflict.

Trade routes connected distant regions.

Cultural exchange enriched society.

Peace endured.

The Golden Age of Raktaloka had begun.

But beneath the surface, hidden even from many sages, karma continued its work.

The seeds of pride remained dormant.

The seeds of ambition remained dormant.

The seeds of superiority remained dormant.

And when the conditions became favorable, they would awaken.

The Blessed One concluded:

"Remember this teaching.

The destruction of harmony does not begin with war.

It begins when beings forget their interdependence.

The preservation of harmony does not require perfection.

It requires humility.

So long as humility remains, peace may endure.

When humility departs, suffering approaches."

Upon hearing these words, countless bodhisattvas attained deeper realization concerning dependent origination.

Many devas generated aspirations toward enlightenment.

The assembly rejoiced.

Celestial flowers descended from the skies of Abhirati.

The jewel trees emitted harmonious sounds.

All praised the wisdom of the Tathāgata.

Book I — The Origin of the Red World

Chapter 6

The Crystal Kingdoms Beneath the Red Sky

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue speaking before the immeasurable assembly gathered within the Pure Land of Abhirati.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati listened attentively, together with countless bodhisattvas, devas, nāgas, and arhats.

The Blessed One said:

"Sāgaramati, after the Covenant of the Two Serpent Peoples was established, a great flourishing occurred throughout Raktaloka.

The oceans prospered.

The deserts prospered.

Knowledge increased.

Trade expanded.

Travel became common.

Fear diminished.

Trust increased.

For many generations, harmony prevailed."

Then the Blessed One caused another vision to appear.

The assembly beheld the Crimson Realm during the height of its splendor.

Across deserts and coastlines rose magnificent cities.

Roadways of polished crystal connected distant settlements.

Great bridges crossed canyons and inland seas.

Towering observatories studied the heavens.

Temples dedicated to contemplation stood upon mountains and beneath oceans.

The entire world seemed illuminated by aspiration and creativity.

Many in the assembly marveled.

Some wondered whether such a realm might eventually become a Pure Land.

The Buddha perceived their thoughts.

He said:

"Sāgaramati, beauty alone does not create a Pure Land.

Knowledge alone does not create a Pure Land.

Power alone does not create a Pure Land.

A Pure Land arises where wisdom and compassion become inseparable."

The assembly bowed in agreement.

Then the Blessed One continued.

Among all the achievements of that era, none were more celebrated than the Crystal Kingdoms.

Beneath the red skies and beneath the mountains of Raktaloka, vast cities were constructed from living crystal.

The sages had learned to work with the crystal formations discovered in earlier ages.

Through concentration and skillful craftsmanship, they shaped them without destroying their natural harmony.

Entire structures emerged from single formations.

Columns rose like frozen rays of light.

Domes shimmered with subtle colors.

Great halls reflected images with perfect clarity.

Some chambers revealed one's appearance.

Others revealed one's emotional state.

Others reflected hidden intentions.

For this reason the sages often used crystal as a symbol of truthfulness.

One ancient teaching proclaimed:

"May the mind become like crystal:
clear, reflective, and unobstructed."

For many generations this saying was revered.

The Blessed One said:

"The symbolism was wise.

Yet many learned to admire the crystal while neglecting the lesson."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, were these kingdoms ruled by kings?"

The Buddha replied:

"Not at first.

The earliest Crystal Kingdoms were guided by councils of sages.

Leadership was earned through wisdom, service, and merit.

Authority existed, but it was balanced by responsibility.

Many decisions were made collectively.

The welfare of the community remained the highest concern."

Hearing this, several bodhisattvas praised the virtue of such arrangements.

The Blessed One nodded.

"For a time, they served well."

The vision expanded.

The assembly saw great gatherings within crystal halls.

Ocean philosophers debated with desert contemplatives.

Engineers collaborated with healers.

Artists worked beside scholars.

Children received education regardless of family or status.

Knowledge was considered a treasure to be shared rather than hoarded.

Many communities prospered greatly.

Even devas occasionally descended to observe these developments.

One celestial being declared:

"Among the worlds of this region, few shine as brightly as Raktaloka."

Another replied:

"Brightness is admirable.

But remember impermanence."

The Blessed One smiled.

"Indeed."

Then he continued.

During this period, the sciences of mind advanced rapidly.

The Jalānāgas refined telepathic communication.

The Vajrāṅga Nāgas deepened concentration practices.

Together they developed remarkable methods for understanding thought and emotion.

They learned how fear spreads.

How anger spreads.

How joy spreads.

How compassion spreads.

Many sages taught that mental states were contagious.

Therefore individuals were encouraged to cultivate virtue for the benefit of the whole community.

For many generations these teachings produced beneficial results.

Crime remained rare.

Violence remained uncommon.

Communities functioned harmoniously.

The assembly witnessed schools dedicated to ethical development.

Young Nāgas learned patience.

They learned honesty.

They learned generosity.

Many sincerely sought wisdom.

The Blessed One said:

"Sāgaramati, these were among the most noble periods in the history of the Crimson Realm.

Remember this.

Those who later became fear-harvesters were once students of virtue.

Those who later sought domination were once children reciting teachings on compassion.

Saṃsāra is subtle."

Then the Blessed One revealed another aspect of the age.

The Crystal Kingdoms became centers of pilgrimage.

Travelers journeyed across continents to study there.

Scholars sought instruction.

Meditators sought deeper concentration.

Inventors sought inspiration.

Every generation expanded upon the accomplishments of those before it.

Libraries grew immense.

Records were preserved with extraordinary care.

The Nāgas believed knowledge could protect them from suffering.

This belief contained wisdom.

Yet it also contained danger.

For knowledge is not identical with liberation.

One may understand countless facts and still remain trapped within ego.

One may memorize teachings and yet fail to embody them.

The Buddha spoke:

"The finger pointing toward the moon is not the moon.

Knowledge pointing toward wisdom is not wisdom itself."

Many bodhisattvas entered contemplation upon hearing this.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, when did decline first begin?"

The Buddha replied:

"It began invisibly.

Most did not notice.

Even many sages failed to perceive it."

At first the Crystal Kingdoms celebrated achievement.

This was harmless.

Then they began ranking achievements.

This was more dangerous.

Soon comparisons multiplied.

Who possessed the strongest concentration?

Who communicated most clearly?

Who discovered the greatest insights?

Who constructed the finest cities?

What began as admiration gradually became competition.

Competition gradually became attachment.

Attachment gradually became pride.

The process unfolded slowly.

No one announced it.

No council approved it.

No law required it.

Yet it spread.

Thus karma matured."

The vision shown by the Buddha changed.

The assembly observed subtle transformations.

Individuals sought recognition.

Teachers desired fame.

Scholars wished to surpass rivals.

Communities began comparing themselves.

The Ocean Nāgas praised their emotional intelligence.

The Desert Nāgas praised their discipline.

Neither yet despised the other.

Yet seeds had begun to sprout.

The Blessed One said:

"Understand this carefully.

Pride rarely appears wearing armor.

It arrives dressed as excellence.

It arrives disguised as accomplishment.

It arrives speaking the language of virtue."

Then he spoke a verse:

The fool says,
'I am greater.'

The fool says,
'I am lesser.'

The fool says,
'I am equal.'

The wise abandon comparison
And dwell in Suchness.

For comparison requires a self,
And the self is a dream.

The assembly became silent.

Many contemplated the subtle forms of conceit hidden within their own minds.

The Blessed One continued.

Despite these developments, the Golden Age had not yet ended.

Peace still endured.

The Covenant remained intact.

The Crystal Kingdoms continued to flourish.

The majority remained virtuous.

Yet the conditions for future suffering were gathering.

As clouds gather before a storm.

As sparks gather before a fire.

As seeds gather before a forest.

The causes were being assembled.

Then a remarkable event occurred.

Certain sages discovered methods for amplifying thought through crystal resonance.

By combining concentration with crystal structures, minds could communicate across immense distances.

Information spread rapidly.

Ideas traveled instantly.

The people rejoiced.

Many believed a new age of enlightenment had arrived.

Yet among the wisest sages, concern emerged.

One elder known as Mahācandra, Great Moon, warned:

"Every tool reflects the mind that uses it.

If wisdom guides it, benefit follows.

If ego guides it, suffering follows."

Many listened.

Many did not.

For prosperity often creates confidence.

And confidence often conceals danger.

The Blessed One looked throughout the assembly.

His voice became gentle.

"Sāgaramati, this is the lesson of the Crystal Kingdoms.

Civilizations are not destroyed by their strengths.

They are destroyed by attachment to their strengths.

The very gifts that elevate beings may become the chains that bind them.

Therefore the bodhisattva cultivates abilities without attachment.

Knowledge without pride.

Power without domination.

Achievement without conceit.

Compassion without self-reference."

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed deeply.

The entire assembly rejoiced.

Many devas scattered celestial flowers.

The jewel trees of Abhirati sang Dharma melodies.

Countless beings generated aspirations toward wisdom free from pride.

Book I — The Origin of the Red World

Chapter 7

The Age of Harmony

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue the sacred narration before the immeasurable assembly gathered in Abhirati.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati listened with unwavering attention, while countless bodhisattvas from the ten directions contemplated the unfolding history of Raktaloka.

The Blessed One said:

"Sāgaramati, after the establishment of the Covenant and the flowering of the Crystal Kingdoms, there arose an age remembered throughout the history of the Crimson Realm as the Age of Harmony.

Never before had the peoples of that world experienced such unity.

Never before had knowledge spread so freely.

Never before had conflict become so rare.

For many generations the blessings of cooperation ripened."

Then the Blessed One manifested a vision.

The assembly beheld Raktaloka at the height of its prosperity.

The oceans glittered beneath crimson skies.

Crystal cities shone like constellations scattered across the continents.

Trade routes connected distant regions.

Travelers moved freely.

Sages were welcomed everywhere.

The people rejoiced in peace.

The assembly marveled at the beauty.

Many devas praised the merits accumulated by the inhabitants.

The Buddha said:

"Know this, Sāgaramati.

Peace is a precious condition.

Yet peace alone is not liberation.

A prison adorned with jewels remains a prison.

Likewise, even a prosperous world remains within saṃsāra unless wisdom completely awakens."

The assembly reflected deeply.

The Blessed One continued.

During that era, the Jalānāgas and Vajrāṅga Nāgas no longer regarded one another as strangers.

Children learned histories that included both peoples.

Scholars traveled between regions without concern.

Families formed bonds across geographical boundaries.

The idea of a divided world gradually faded.

Many believed the ancient differences had been overcome forever.

Joint councils governed matters affecting the entire realm.

Disputes were resolved through dialogue.

Knowledge was exchanged openly.

No armies marched.

No fortresses were constructed.

Weapons became symbols of earlier ages.

Many predicted that warfare itself would soon vanish from memory.

The devas rejoiced.

The nāga kings rejoiced.

Even many spirits dwelling within the mountains and seas rejoiced.

The Buddha said:

"For a time, their joy was justified."

The vision expanded.

The assembly observed magnificent gatherings attended by sages from every region.

Thousands assembled within vast crystal halls.

Philosophers debated the nature of consciousness.

Scientists investigated the properties of crystal resonance.

Artists created works celebrating unity.

Poets composed hymns praising cooperation.

The people took pride in their civilization.

At first this pride appeared harmless.

For they celebrated genuine accomplishments.

Yet hidden dangers already accompanied it.

The Blessed One continued:

"Sāgaramati, there exists a subtle distinction between gratitude and pride.

Gratitude says:

'How fortunate that conditions have allowed this goodness to arise.'

Pride says:

'We ourselves are the source of this greatness.'

The first opens the heart.

The second strengthens delusion."

Then the Blessed One spoke a verse:

When blessings appear,
Give thanks.

When wisdom appears,
Give thanks.

When prosperity appears,
Give thanks.

But do not cling.

For gratitude bows.
Pride stands erect.

And what stands erect
Will eventually fall.

The assembly became silent.

Many contemplated the difference.

Then the Blessed One revealed further details of the Age of Harmony.

Disease became uncommon.

Poverty diminished.

Education expanded.

The sciences flourished.

Communication networks linked distant communities through crystal resonance.

Messages could travel across continents.

Ideas spread with remarkable speed.

The people celebrated these achievements.

Many believed suffering itself might eventually disappear through knowledge.

One famous sage proclaimed:

"With sufficient understanding, every problem can be solved."

Another declared:

"Through the advancement of knowledge, we shall master all obstacles."

Such statements inspired hope.

Yet they also contained hidden conceit.

For suffering does not arise solely from external circumstances.

Its deepest roots lie within the mind.

The Buddha said:

"Many sought mastery over the world.

Few sought mastery over craving."

Sāgaramati bowed his head.

He understood.

The Blessed One continued.

During that age there emerged numerous schools of philosophy.

Some emphasized reason.

Some emphasized meditation.

Some emphasized harmony.

Others emphasized collective welfare.

Many teachings contained fragments of truth.

Yet none possessed the complete Dharma.

The sages understood impermanence intellectually.

Yet few contemplated it deeply.

They discussed non-self.

Yet many remained attached to identity.

They praised compassion.

Yet subtle desires for recognition persisted.

The appearance of wisdom increased faster than wisdom itself.

This imbalance would later prove dangerous.

The assembly then witnessed great celebrations held throughout Raktaloka.

Festivals commemorated the Covenant.

Monuments honored ancient sages.

Public ceremonies celebrated scientific discoveries.

The people sincerely believed they had entered an irreversible age of progress.

Children grew up hearing:

"Our civilization has surpassed the errors of the past."

"Our harmony will endure forever."

"Our knowledge protects us from decline."

The Buddha looked compassionately upon the assembly.

"Whenever beings believe themselves immune to decline, decline approaches."

Then he recited:

The flower at full bloom
Has already begun to fade.

The moon at fullest brightness
Has already begun to wane.

The empire at greatest power
Has already begun to weaken.

Only Suchness neither increases nor decreases.

All conditioned things
Move toward change.

The assembly listened with profound attention.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, were there none who perceived the danger?"

The Buddha replied:

"There were a few."

Among the sages arose contemplatives who sensed subtle disturbances.

One was known as Candraprabha, Moon Radiance.

Through prolonged meditation he perceived hidden currents moving through society.

He observed increasing attachment to achievement.

Increasing fascination with influence.

Increasing identification with knowledge.

He warned:

"We have learned to shape crystals.

But have we learned to shape the mind?

We have connected cities.

But have we connected ourselves to wisdom?

We have conquered distance.

But have we conquered conceit?"

Many respected him.

Few understood him.

For prosperity makes warnings difficult to hear.

Another sage named Ratnaśīla, Jewel Conduct, taught:

"The danger before us is not invasion.

The danger before us is pride."

Yet many responded:

"What pride?

Our civilization is peaceful.

Our achievements are real.

Our success is undeniable."

Thus the warnings were largely ignored.

The Buddha said:

"Sāgaramati, this is often the fate of those who perceive danger before others.

When conditions appear favorable, few desire caution."

Then the Blessed One revealed a deeper truth.

The Age of Harmony generated immense merit.

Countless beings practiced generosity.

Countless beings acted ethically.

Countless beings developed concentration.

As a result, many were reborn in fortunate realms.

Many ascended to heavenly worlds.

Many accumulated causes for future awakening.

Therefore this age was not false.

Its goodness was genuine.

Its virtues were real.

Its accomplishments were worthy of praise.

Yet because enlightenment had not been attained, impermanence remained undefeated.

And because impermanence remained undefeated, decline remained possible.

The Buddha then said:

"Remember this well.

The tragedy of Raktaloka was not that it lacked goodness.

The tragedy was that it mistook goodness for final liberation."

The assembly became deeply moved.

Many bodhisattvas contemplated how often civilizations confuse temporary success with ultimate wisdom.

Then the Blessed One revealed the final vision of the chapter.

The Crimson Realm shone brilliantly beneath the red heavens.

Its cities flourished.

Its people prospered.

Its sages taught.

Its children laughed.

Its future seemed limitless.

Yet far beneath the surface, hidden even from many wise ones, seeds continued to germinate.

The seeds of pride.

The seeds of comparison.

The seeds of superiority.

The seeds of domination.

Not yet visible.

Not yet powerful.

But growing.

The Blessed One concluded:

"Thus ended the purest period of the Crimson Realm.

Its people stood at a crossroads without realizing it.

Before them lay two paths.

One led toward wisdom.

The other toward power.

One led toward awakening.

The other toward bondage.

The choice had not yet been made.

But soon conditions would arise that would reveal the inclinations hidden within their hearts."

When these words were spoken, celestial flowers descended from the skies of Abhirati.

The jewel trees sang melodies concerning impermanence.

Countless beings generated bodhicitta.

Many attained deeper insight into the fragile nature of worldly success.

The entire assembly praised the wisdom of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book I — The Origin of the Red World

Chapter 8

The First Discovery of Psychic Power

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in Abhirati.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, bowed with palms joined, and addressed the Blessed One:

"World-Honored One, in the Age of Harmony the peoples of Raktaloka possessed learning, discipline, and mutual goodwill. Yet Your Reverence has repeatedly warned that danger was approaching. By what cause did that danger first appear?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, not all discoveries are harmful, nor are all powers obstacles. Among the thirty-seven aids to awakening there is diligent effort; among the attainments cultivated by noble disciples there are meditative absorptions and even extraordinary abilities. But when power is severed from wisdom and compassion, it becomes another thread in the net of saṃsāra.

Listen well, and I shall explain."

The entire assembly became silent.

Even the jeweled birds resting in the wish-fulfilling trees ceased their songs.

The Buddha extended a beam of sapphire light from the tuft of white hair between his brows, and within that radiance there appeared a vision of ancient Raktaloka.

In those days there existed a great academy called the Pavilion of the Clear Mirror, situated where the crystal mountains overlooked the western sea.

There gathered philosophers, contemplatives, physicians, mathematicians, artisans, and seekers from both the Jalānāgas and the Vajrāṅga Nāgas.

They did not gather to conquer others.

They gathered because they loved understanding.

They observed that the mind could calm the body.

They observed that intention altered conduct.

They observed that communities became peaceful when compassion was cultivated.

From these observations arose a question:

"If wholesome thoughts transform conduct, what further capacities might a disciplined mind possess?"

Thus began many years of careful meditation.

The sages sat in silence for months.

They restrained greed.

They restrained anger.

They restrained idle speech.

They cultivated attention.

Some entered profound absorptions resembling the meditative attainments known in other world-systems.

As concentration deepened, unusual experiences arose.

One practitioner perceived events occurring in a distant village.

Another recalled scenes from childhood with impossible clarity.

A third anticipated the arrival of travelers several days before they appeared.

The sages did not immediately proclaim miracles.

Instead they compared observations, repeated experiments, and questioned one another with honesty.

The Blessed One said:

"Sāgaramati, this caution was skillful.

The wise do not rush to extraordinary conclusions.

They test appearances against truth."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, were these attainments false?"

The Buddha answered:

"No.

Many were genuine manifestations of concentrated mind.

Throughout innumerable world-systems, beings who cultivate deep samādhi may develop extraordinary faculties.

Yet these faculties are conditioned.

They arise.

They cease.

They do not reveal an eternal self.

They do not by themselves destroy ignorance."

Hearing this, many young bodhisattvas in the assembly abandoned subtle attachment to miraculous powers.

The Blessed One continued:

Among the researchers of the Pavilion there arose a contemplative named Prabhākara, Light-Maker.

He was disciplined, patient, and free from vanity.

During prolonged meditation he discovered that emotional states subtly influenced the clarity of nearby minds.

When his heart rested in loving-kindness, companions found concentration easier.

When anxiety entered his mind, agitation spread almost unnoticed through the hall.

He recorded these observations and warned his colleagues:

"The mind is not isolated.

Each thought conditions other thoughts.

Therefore let every practitioner guard the heart."

These teachings brought benefit to many.

Communities encouraged ethical conduct before advanced meditation.

Teachers insisted that generosity and truthfulness should precede difficult contemplative practices.

For a generation, wisdom and discipline walked together.

Then there arose another investigator named Kṣemaruci.

He possessed exceptional brilliance but lacked the humility of Prabhākara.

Where others asked, "How may this benefit all beings?" he often asked, "How far can this ability extend?"

He intensified concentration beyond customary limits.

He experimented with crystal resonators beneath the mountains.

By combining disciplined attention with specially prepared chambers, he discovered that intentions could be projected over astonishing distances.

The accomplishment amazed the learned societies.

Messengers became unnecessary for many tasks.

Warnings of floods, storms, or earthquakes spread rapidly.

Medical knowledge traveled to remote settlements.

Separated families communicated across continents.

The people rejoiced.

The devas praised these wholesome applications.

The Blessed One declared:

"Power guided by compassion becomes service."

For many years this remained true.

Yet admiration grew around those possessing exceptional abilities.

Children imitated them.

Patrons supported them.

Their names became widely celebrated.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, renown attached itself to concentration.

One elder observed this change and cautioned:

"When meditation becomes a ladder to prestige, the ascent conceals a descent."

His words were copied into many libraries.

Yet only a few took them to heart.

Then there occurred an event remembered in later chronicles as the Echo in the Crystal Vault.

A group of accomplished meditators entered a chamber whose walls amplified subtle vibrations of thought.

Together they established unified concentration.

For an instant every participant experienced the emotions of the others directly.

Joy was shared.

Fear was shared.

Compassion was shared.

Grief was shared.

When the meditation ended, several wept.

Others laughed.

Many embraced one another.

They declared:

"Truly there is no isolated mind."

The Blessed One paused.

Then he addressed Sāgaramati:

"This experience approached an important truth but did not complete it.

Interdependence does not abolish ignorance.

Shared experience is not identical with realization of emptiness.

One may perceive connection while still clinging to self."

Sāgaramati bowed and replied:

"The distinction is profound, Blessed One."

The Buddha continued.

As investigations advanced, scholars classified many unusual capacities.

Some could perceive subtle intentions.

Some sensed approaching danger.

Some strengthened memory.

Some inspired calm.

Others communicated silently across great distances.

The sages referred to these collectively as refinements born of concentration.

The noblest teachers insisted:

"These abilities are by-products.

Seek virtue, not marvels."

But ambitious students repeated only the final part of the instruction:

"Seek abilities."

Thus the meaning began to drift.

The assembly in Abhirati sighed softly.

For many recognized how easily wholesome teachings become distorted.

The Blessed One then recited these verses:

The moon reflected in water
Is bright but cannot be grasped.

The rainbow spanning the valley
Appears near but cannot be held.

Psychic powers resemble this.
They dazzle the eye,
Yet vanish when clung to.

The Dharma is not measured
By distance seen,
Thoughts perceived,
Or wonders performed.

The Dharma is measured
By greed diminished,
Hatred abandoned,
And delusion exhausted.

After hearing these verses, countless devas relinquished fascination with marvels.

Many nāga kings generated renewed commitment to ethical discipline.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, if the discoveries themselves were not evil, wherein lay the root of future suffering?"

The Blessed One answered:

"The root was subtle appropriation.

Certain practitioners began saying:

'My concentration.'

'My gift.'

'My superior perception.'

What had arisen through dependent origination was claimed as possession.

Where possession appears, attachment follows.

Where attachment follows, fear of loss appears.

Where fear appears, control is desired.

Thus the wheel turned."

The vision of Raktaloka changed.

The assembly beheld young students competing to display extraordinary concentration.

Teachers compared lineages.

Institutions celebrated remarkable individuals.

Most remained ethical.

Most remained sincere.

Yet the atmosphere had shifted.

Admiration slowly became hierarchy.

Hierarchy slowly became identity.

Identity slowly became conceit.

The Blessed One said:

"No thunder announced this change.

No comet crossed the heavens.

No city fell.

The transformation occurred within thought itself.

Therefore guard the first arising of conceit more carefully than armies guard their gates."

Finally, the Buddha looked upon Sāgaramati with great compassion.

"Understand well.

The powers discovered in that age were not the enemy.

The enemy was ignorance claiming ownership.

The crystal did not corrupt them.

The meditations did not corrupt them.

The subtle abilities did not corrupt them.

Clinging corrupted them.

Therefore the bodhisattva may cultivate concentration without pride, knowledge without domination, and ability without attachment, dedicating every wholesome attainment to the liberation of all beings."

When these words were spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas realized a profound patience regarding the unborn nature of phenomena.

Many generated even greater compassion for beings intoxicated by accomplishment.

Celestial blossoms descended like gentle rain throughout Abhirati.

The great assembly bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata and rejoiced.

Book II — The Turning Away from Suchness

Chapter 9

The Arising of Pride

Thus have I heard.

When the Blessed Akṣobhya had concluded the account of the First Discovery of Psychic Power, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati remained seated in profound contemplation. At length he rose, bowed before the Tathāgata, and asked:

"World-Honored One, if the peoples of Raktaloka possessed generosity, discipline, learning, and remarkable powers of concentration, by what cause did they turn away from Suchness? How did the mirror of their minds become clouded?"

The Blessed One answered:

"Sāgaramati, no being falls from the sky into delusion. Delusion ripens from countless unnoticed intentions, as moss slowly covers a stone left untended.

Attend carefully, and I shall explain the arising of pride."

At these words the jewel trees of Abhirati rang softly, as though repeating the Dharma.

Then the Blessed One displayed another vision.

The assembly beheld the Crystal Kingdoms during the closing years of the Age of Harmony. Their cities remained radiant. Their schools remained full. Their councils continued to govern with apparent justice. Travelers crossed deserts and oceans without fear.

To ordinary eyes, nothing seemed amiss.

Yet to the eye of a Buddha, subtle cracks had begun to appear.

The Blessed One declared:

"The gravest illnesses often begin without pain.

Likewise the gravest defilements often begin without conflict."

Within the great academies there arose a custom of honoring those who demonstrated exceptional meditative attainments.

At first this recognition served wholesome purposes. Teachers who had cultivated discipline inspired younger students. Those who practiced compassion were praised for their conduct.

But over generations, public admiration shifted.

Less attention was given to kindness.

More attention was given to unusual accomplishments.

Those who communicated thoughts across great distances became renowned.

Those who could enter profound absorptions were celebrated.

Those who solved intricate philosophical disputes gained influence.

The people admired brilliance.

Few remembered to ask whether brilliance was accompanied by humility.

Then there arose among the scholars an expression often repeated:

"The clearer the mirror, the higher the sage."

Originally it meant that purity of mind reflected reality faithfully.

But gradually many interpreted it differently.

They began comparing mirrors.

One would say:

"My reflection is clearer than yours."

Another would answer:

"My concentration is deeper."

Another would boast:

"My insight surpasses that of the southern schools."

Thus comparison entered where contemplation had once dwelt.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, was comparison itself the source of suffering?"

The Buddha replied:

"Comparison becomes suffering when joined to appropriation.

To observe difference is natural.

To construct identity from difference is bondage.

The wise say, 'This flower is red and that flower is white.'

The ignorant say, 'Because my flower is red, I myself am greater.'

Thus illusion is born."

Then the Blessed One uttered these verses:

The mountain does not envy the river.

The moon does not compete with the stars.

The lotus does not despise the reed.

Only the deluded mind
Measures itself against appearances
And imagines victory.

As the years passed, new institutions emerged throughout Raktaloka.

Guilds of contemplation formed.

Orders of crystal researchers arose.

Great libraries catalogued methods of concentration.

These developments brought genuine benefits.

Knowledge spread farther than ever before.

Yet prestige accumulated around certain schools.

Students sought famous teachers not only for wisdom but for reputation.

Families boasted that their children studied under celebrated masters.

Merit became mingled with vanity.

Even acts of generosity were sometimes performed to gain admiration.

One elder named Śāntirasa perceived the danger.

Gathering his disciples, he spoke:

"If your meditation causes you to look down upon another being, your meditation has become food for ignorance.

If your knowledge causes you to seek praise, your knowledge has become another ornament for the ego.

If your virtue causes contempt, it is no longer virtue."

His disciples treasured these words.

Yet outside their community they were increasingly neglected.

For the spirit of the age had begun to change.

The Blessed One then explained:

"Sāgaramati, among the eighty-four thousand doors of delusion, pride is among the most subtle.

Anger announces itself.

Greed reveals itself.

Fear trembles openly.

But pride often disguises itself as righteousness, excellence, refinement, or duty.

Thus many embrace it while believing themselves virtuous."

The vision shifted.

The assembly saw councils in which scholars quietly ranked one another.

Artists measured whose works received greater acclaim.

Meditators counted the duration of their absorptions.

Engineers boasted of more elaborate crystal constructions.

No violence occurred.

No laws were broken.

Yet invisible walls arose between hearts.

Communities that once exchanged discoveries freely began withholding certain techniques.

Teachers became possessive of lineages.

Recognition became a form of wealth.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Did no one perceive the danger?"

The Blessed One answered:

"A few perceived it clearly.

One among them was the contemplative Ratnaśīla.

He journeyed from city to city carrying no possessions except a worn robe and a crystal bowl.

When invited to speak, he would place the bowl before the assembly and ask:

'Which reflection inside this bowl belongs to the bowl itself?'

Many answered in confusion.

Then he would overturn the vessel.

The reflections vanished.

He would say:

'So too with status, fame, and superiority.

They appear because conditions gather.

When conditions disperse, where are they to be found?'"

Some understood and rejoiced.

Many applauded politely and returned unchanged to their habits.

The Blessed One smiled gently.

"It is difficult to awaken those intoxicated by success."

Then he continued.

As conceit spread, language itself subtly changed.

Where earlier generations had spoken of "our shared learning," later generations increasingly spoke of "our achievements."

Where they had once said, "May all flourish," they now said, "May our school prevail."

Where they had once sought truth together, they now sought recognition.

No decree established these changes.

No ruler commanded them.

The transformation unfolded through countless ordinary conversations.

Thus dependent origination revealed itself even in speech.

The Blessed One raised his hand.

Upon his palm appeared a single grain of crimson sand.

He addressed the assembly:

"Could this grain alone bury a city?"

They answered:

"No, World-Honored One."

He added another grain.

And another.

Soon his palm overflowed.

Then he opened his hand, and a mountain of sand appeared in the vision.

The Buddha said:

"So too does conceit accumulate.

One thought seems insignificant.

One boast seems harmless.

One comparison appears trivial.

Yet repeated without wisdom, they become the dunes beneath which civilizations disappear."

Hearing this, many devas shuddered.

Many nāga kings lowered their heads in reflection.

Then the Blessed One recited:

Guard the first spark,
And the forest need not burn.

Guard the first boast,
And kingdoms remain at peace.

Guard the first conceit,
And wisdom flowers.

Ignore the smallest poison,
And even sweet water
Will become bitter.

At that time there emerged among the younger generation a phrase frequently repeated in the academies:

"We have surpassed the ancients."

Older sages heard these words with sadness.

For they knew that reverence for predecessors had begun to fade.

Not because inquiry was discouraged, but because humility itself was being forgotten.

Some ambitious students sought psychic attainments primarily to distinguish themselves.

Others pursued knowledge chiefly to gain influence.

The very disciplines once cultivated for liberation became instruments of identity.

Still, the greater part of society remained outwardly peaceful.

Markets prospered.

Festivals continued.

The Covenant endured.

Travel between ocean and desert remained common.

Many believed the warnings of decline were exaggerated.

The Blessed One looked upon Sāgaramati and said:

"This is the nature of gradual corruption.

When poison enters a clear spring, the first cup may still taste pure.

Only later does sickness reveal itself."

Then he concluded:

"The arising of pride was not the end of harmony, but its hidden turning.

The mirror had not shattered.

Yet a fine dust had settled upon it.

Unless removed through humility and insight into emptiness, that dust would thicken until beings mistook their own reflections for reality itself.

From that error would arise the longing not merely to excel, but to rule."

When the Blessed One finished speaking, innumerable bodhisattvas attained deeper understanding of the danger of subtle conceit.

The devas scattered celestial blossoms.

The nāga kings bowed low.

The entire assembly praised the Dharma that cuts through pride without condemning those ensnared by it, for even they retain the luminous potential for awakening.

Book II — The Turning Away from Suchness

Chapter 10

The Search for Dominion

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the vast assembly in Abhirati.

After hearing the teaching on the arising of pride, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his seat, circumambulated the Blessed One three times, and respectfully inquired:

"World-Honored One, when pride had arisen among the peoples of Raktaloka, by what cause did they pass from comparison to the desire for dominion? For it seems a great distance lies between admiring oneself and seeking to rule others."

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, the distance is not so great as it appears.

From ignorance arises the conceit 'I am.'

From conceit arises comparison.

From comparison arises attachment to superiority.

From attachment to superiority arises fear of losing superiority.

From fear arises the wish to control conditions.

And from the wish to control conditions arises the search for dominion.

Thus does a single delusion unfold into many."

Then the Blessed One caused another vision to appear within the sky of Abhirati.

The assembly beheld the Crystal Kingdoms many generations after the first stirrings of conceit.

The cities remained magnificent.

The libraries remained open.

The academies continued to flourish.

Yet the conversations of the learned had subtly changed.

No longer did they ask merely,

"What is true?"

Increasingly they asked,

"How may truth be used?"

No longer did they ask,

"How may knowledge relieve suffering?"

Increasingly they asked,

"How may knowledge increase influence?"

The Blessed One said:

"Knowledge sought for liberation is a raft.

Knowledge sought for domination becomes a chain."

In those days there arose a circle of philosophers and meditators who called themselves the Custodians of Order.

Their stated intention was noble.

They believed that if the wisest guided society more directly, conflict and confusion could be prevented.

Many among them sincerely desired the common good.

Yet hidden within their proposals was an unexamined assumption:

That they alone possessed sufficient clarity to direct the lives of others.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, is it not proper for the wise to advise those who are confused?"

The Buddha answered:

"It is proper to teach.

It is proper to counsel.

It is proper to serve.

But the bodhisattva guides without attachment to mastery.

The bodhisattva offers the Dharma without craving obedience.

Compassion liberates.

Conceit seeks possession."

The assembly rejoiced at this distinction.

Meanwhile, within Raktaloka, the Custodians of Order gained admiration.

Their members were disciplined.

Their scholarship was impressive.

Their meditations profound.

Kings, councils, and merchants sought their counsel.

Their influence expanded.

At first they merely advised.

Then they recommended standards.

Then they proposed regulations.

Finally some among them began to ask:

"If enlightened planning benefits society, why should governance not rest permanently in the hands of those most capable?"

Others replied:

"If wisdom deserves honor, should it not also deserve authority?"

These ideas spread gradually.

No rebellion occurred.

No tyrant seized power.

The transformation happened through applause.

The people welcomed efficiency.

They praised coordination.

They admired certainty.

The Blessed One declared:

"Sāgaramati, beings often surrender freedom willingly when promised security.

Yet genuine security cannot be established upon ignorance."

Among the Desert Nāgas there arose another movement.

Its members devoted themselves to discipline and precision.

They sought to optimize every labor, every journey, every conversation.

Their motto was:

"Nothing should be left to chance."

For a time their methods produced remarkable results.

Harvests improved.

Travel became safer.

Buildings lasted longer.

The people praised them.

But one elder named Candrasena quietly warned:

"Control over tools is useful.

Control over the elements may be skillful.

But the wish to control every outcome is attachment disguised as wisdom."

Few listened.

For success is persuasive.

The Blessed One then manifested another vision.

The assembly saw councils where maps of the Crimson Realm covered crystal tables.

Scholars debated how to coordinate resources across continents.

Engineers designed systems linking cities by thought and signal.

Sages proposed networks through which information could flow instantly.

These projects brought undeniable benefit.

Yet beneath them another aspiration slowly emerged.

Some began to imagine not merely communication, but complete oversight.

Not merely guidance, but administration.

Not merely cooperation, but comprehensive direction.

The Buddha said:

"When beings forget that all phenomena are empty of independent self, they begin constructing ever more elaborate selves.

An individual creates an ego.

A family creates prestige.

A school creates identity.

A civilization creates destiny.

Then all labor to defend what never possessed permanence."

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati reflected deeply.

He asked:

"World-Honored One, was there no remedy available?"

The Blessed One answered:

"There was.

Many remedies were available.

But remedies require acceptance."

Then he spoke of the wandering contemplative Śāntideva of the Crimson Realm.

This sage traveled without escort.

He entered prosperous cities and poor settlements alike.

Whenever invited to teach, he would draw a circle in the dust.

Pointing to its center he asked,

'Where is its beginning?'

Pointing to its edge he asked,

'Where is its ending?'

The listeners offered many answers.

Then he erased the circle with his foot.

He would say:

'Power imagines itself permanent.

Conditions erase it.'

Some understood.

Most admired the performance and returned unchanged.

The Blessed One recited:

The hand that grasps the wind
Finds only emptiness.

The mind that grasps dominion
Finds only anxiety.

For what must be defended
Can never provide peace.

The free one governs the self.
The deluded one seeks to govern others.

As generations passed, ambitious students increasingly sought positions of influence.

They excelled in meditation not to abandon attachment but to distinguish themselves.

They mastered communication not to spread compassion but to extend authority.

They accumulated followers.

Institutions praised measurable accomplishment.

Invisible virtues such as humility and contentment became difficult to recognize.

Thus visible success overshadowed inward transformation.

Even so, not all succumbed.

Great communities of practitioners continued cultivating generosity, patience, and loving-kindness.

Many householders lived simple and virtuous lives.

Many teachers quietly embodied wisdom.

The light of Suchness had not departed.

It had merely become obscured by gathering clouds.

The Blessed One then revealed the deepest root of the Search for Dominion.

He said:

"Within the hearts of certain accomplished practitioners there arose a subtle fear.

They reflected:

'If those less disciplined possess influence equal to ours, they may misuse it.'

This concern was understandable.

Yet instead of responding with compassion and education, they responded with attachment to control.

Thus fear disguised itself as responsibility.

Attachment disguised itself as guardianship.

Conceit disguised itself as service.

The masks changed.

The poison remained."

Hearing this, many in the assembly attained profound insight into the subtle operations of ignorance.

Then the Blessed One spoke these verses:

Not every chain is forged of iron.

Some are woven from noble intentions.

Not every prison bears walls.

Some are built from certainty.

The one who clings to ruling
And the one who clings to resisting
Remain bound alike.

Only wisdom without possession
Walks freely.

Finally, the Buddha looked toward Sāgaramati and the gathered bodhisattvas.

"The Search for Dominion did not begin because the peoples of Raktaloka loved cruelty.

It began because they forgot emptiness.

Believing themselves separate, they sought to arrange the world around imagined selves.

Believing themselves indispensable, they mistook stewardship for ownership.

Believing themselves secure, they overlooked impermanence.

Thus they turned, step by almost invisible step, away from Suchness."

At these words the assembly became still.

The jewel trees of Abhirati emitted tones like distant bells.

Many devas cast down heavenly flowers.

Many nāga kings renewed vows of humility.

And innumerable bodhisattvas generated even firmer resolve to cultivate wisdom inseparable from compassion.

Book II — The Turning Away from Suchness

Chapter 11

The Science of Mental Influence

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue teaching the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati and the immeasurable assembly abiding in Abhirati.

After hearing of the Search for Dominion, Sāgaramati bowed and asked:

"World-Honored One, by what causes did the peoples of Raktaloka transform the wholesome study of the mind into an instrument of control? How did contemplation become manipulation?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, a knife may prepare medicine or inflict injury. The fault does not lie in the metal but in the intention that guides the hand. So too the investigation of mind may lead to compassion or to bondage.

Listen carefully."

Then the Blessed One manifested before the assembly a vision of the Crystal Kingdoms in the generations following the rise of subtle conceit.

The great halls of learning remained active.

Meditators continued their disciplines.

Scholars continued their inquiries.

Healers, philosophers, and engineers still worked side by side.

Outwardly the civilization appeared more enlightened than ever before.

Yet inwardly its motivations had begun to diverge.

The sages no longer asked merely:

"How does the mind awaken?"

Increasingly they asked:

"How does the mind respond?"

And after that:

"How may the mind be guided?"

And after that:

"How may the mind be directed?"

The Blessed One said:

"Thus the language changed first, while the heart changed afterward."

Among the academies there arose a discipline known as the Study of Harmonious Resonance.

Its earliest masters were compassionate practitioners.

They observed that a calm teacher could soothe frightened children.

A truthful ruler could encourage honesty among citizens.

A generous elder inspired generosity in others.

From these observations they concluded that minds condition one another.

This conclusion was correct.

They therefore encouraged the cultivation of loving-kindness, patience, and equanimity as blessings extending beyond the individual.

For many years this teaching produced abundant merit.

Communities became more peaceful.

Conflicts were resolved more gently.

Parents instructed children through example rather than coercion.

Monastics and householders alike praised the discipline.

The Blessed One declared:

"Such use of understanding accords with the Dharma.

The bodhisattva influences others by embodying wisdom, not by diminishing their freedom."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"How, then, did error arise?"

The Buddha answered:

"When wholesome effects are observed, the deluded mind often asks not how to cultivate virtue, but how to reproduce the effect without cultivating virtue."

The assembly contemplated this in silence.

The vision changed.

Among younger investigators there appeared a fascination with efficiency.

Some reasoned:

"If gentle presence calms a fearful crowd, might stronger techniques calm them more quickly?"

Others asked:

"If careful speech persuades a listener, might subtle methods persuade many listeners at once?"

At first these questions arose from practical concerns.

Relief efforts during disasters improved.

Panic during storms diminished.

Negotiations between distant cities became easier.

The people rejoiced.

Then there appeared a brilliant but restless scholar named Meghacitta, Cloud Mind.

He devoted decades to studying patterns of attention.

He learned that repeated symbols shaped expectation.

Repeated stories shaped memory.

Repeated emotional associations shaped judgment.

He presented these discoveries before the High Council.

Many praised his insight.

Yet before departing he offered a warning:

"Knowledge of influence must remain governed by ethics.

If used without compassion, it will become a source of immeasurable suffering."

His warning was inscribed upon crystal tablets.

Later generations admired the inscription.

Few obeyed it.

The Blessed One sighed softly.

"So it often is."

Then he spoke these verses:

To know another's fear
And exploit it
Is darkness.

To know another's fear
And relieve it
Is compassion.

The same knowledge
May nourish wisdom
Or nourish delusion.

Therefore examine intention
Before method.

As centuries passed, the Study of Harmonious Resonance expanded into many disciplines.

Teachers catalogued how voices affected emotion.

Artists studied the influence of color and form.

Architects learned that spacious halls encouraged tranquility while cramped passages encouraged anxiety.

Musicians observed that rhythm altered collective mood.

These discoveries enriched festivals, healing practices, and education.

For a long time they remained wholesome.

Yet among certain circles another aspiration quietly emerged.

Some asked:

"If crowds may be calmed, may they also be excited?

If hope may be encouraged, may fear be encouraged?

If attention may be directed toward wisdom, may it also be directed elsewhere?"

These questions troubled the elder sages.

The contemplative Ratnaśīla addressed the academies:

"Every influence imposed without compassion strengthens ignorance in both speaker and listener.

The wish to control another's perception is itself a fetter."

Many applauded.

Few changed course.

For success accompanied experimentation.

Officials discovered that carefully framed announcements reduced unrest.

Merchants found that symbols and repetition increased trust in their goods.

Public ceremonies became more elaborate.

Words were chosen not merely for truth but for effect.

Appearance slowly eclipsed substance.

The Blessed One said:

"Sāgaramati, Māra rarely commands beings to reject truth outright.

More often Māra whispers:

'Adjust it slightly.

Embellish it.

Repeat only what is convenient.'

Thus falsehood grows from neglected honesty."

The vision broadened.

The assembly beheld immense crystal chambers where thoughts and emotions were studied with astonishing precision.

Practitioners mapped patterns of attention.

They observed how stories shaped memory across generations.

They learned that repeated fear narrowed judgment.

Repeated anger hardened identity.

Repeated compassion softened hostility.

These observations were accurate.

But many forgot the most important conclusion:

That they themselves remained subject to the same conditioning.

Believing they stood above influence, they became especially vulnerable to it.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, did no council forbid misuse?"

The Buddha answered:

"Several councils attempted to establish ethical boundaries.

They declared:

'No teaching shall deliberately inflame hatred.

No technique shall seek domination.

No practitioner shall conceal truth for selfish gain.'

These resolutions were sincere.

Yet enforcement weakened as ambition increased.

For when conceit occupies the mind, exceptions multiply."

The Blessed One then recited:

A crooked ruler
May still draw a perfect circle.

A brilliant scholar
May still misunderstand the heart.

The clever deceive others.

The wise first examine themselves.

Thereafter arose certain influential teachers who argued:

"People desire guidance.

Strong direction reduces confusion.

If minds can be gently shaped toward social order, all will benefit."

Many citizens accepted these arguments.

Order did indeed increase.

Disputes declined.

Efficiency improved.

But dependence also grew.

Independent reflection weakened.

Communities gradually looked outward for instruction rather than inward for discernment.

The elder Mahācandra lamented:

"They polish mirrors yet forbid others to look into them."

Few grasped his meaning.

The Blessed One turned to Sāgaramati.

"Understand this well.

Influence itself is unavoidable.

Parents influence children.

Teachers influence students.

Friends influence friends.

The Dharma itself transforms those who hear it.

The question is not whether influence exists.

The question is whether it arises from compassion rooted in emptiness or from attachment rooted in self."

Then the Tathāgata offered this parable:

There was once a ferryman who carried travelers safely across a swift river.

He asked only modest payment and rejoiced when others reached the far shore.

Nearby lived another ferryman.

He secretly loosened the bridges upstream so that more travelers would require his services.

Both transported people.

Yet their karma differed beyond measure.

Likewise, one who teaches in order to free beings accumulates merit.

One who shapes perception to increase dependence accumulates bondage.

As the chapter drew to its close, the vision darkened slightly.

The Crystal Kingdoms still shone.

The festivals continued.

The academies remained celebrated.

But beneath the outward brilliance, subtle habits of manipulation had begun to take root.

Not yet through violence.

Not yet through tyranny.

But through the increasingly common belief that understanding another mind granted the right to direct it.

The Blessed One concluded:

"Sāgaramati, this was the beginning of the Science of Mental Influence.

Its foundations contained genuine insight into dependent origination.

Its highest practitioners sought healing and harmony.

Yet because emptiness was forgotten and conceit remained unpurified, many came to mistake knowledge of causes for ownership of beings.

From that misunderstanding would arise still greater delusions in the ages to come."

When the Blessed One had spoken, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati and the entire assembly rejoiced in the Dharma while resolving never to separate wisdom from compassion nor skill from ethical restraint.

Book II — The Turning Away from Suchness

Chapter 12

The Masks of Transformation

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly in Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Science of Mental Influence had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his seat, bowed with joined palms, and addressed the World-Honored One:

"Blessed One, I have heard that in later ages the peoples of Raktaloka became known for concealing themselves behind appearances, assuming many identities, and obscuring their true intentions. How did this practice arise? Was it born from malice, or from some more subtle cause?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, listen carefully.

The gravest deceptions are seldom born from hatred alone. More often they arise from attachment mixed with fear.

One who fears rejection hides his face.

One who fears loss hides his motives.

One who fears impermanence hides from reality itself.

Thus concealment grows from clinging."

The assembly became silent.

Then the Blessed One extended a ray of sapphire light, and within its brilliance appeared another vision of ancient Raktaloka.

The Crystal Kingdoms still flourished.

The oceans still shimmered beneath the crimson heavens.

Yet among the academies and councils a new discipline had begun to develop.

Originally it was called the Art of Skillful Representation.

Its first purpose was compassionate.

Teachers adopted forms that comforted frightened children.

Healers adjusted their speech according to the needs of patients.

Mediators presented difficult truths with gentleness so that opposing parties might listen without anger.

The elder sages praised such conduct.

For they remembered the principle later expressed by many bodhisattvas:

"Teach according to the capacities of beings."

The Blessed One said:

"To adapt language with compassion is skillful means.

To conceal truth for selfish gain is deception.

Though they may outwardly resemble one another, their karmic fruits differ greatly."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"How may one distinguish them, Blessed One?"

The Buddha answered:

"Examine intention.

If adaptation seeks another's liberation, it accords with wisdom.

If adaptation seeks another's dependence, it nourishes ignorance.

The heart determines the path."

As generations passed, practitioners refined methods of presentation.

Diplomats learned to speak differently before different audiences.

Merchants altered symbols to suit local customs.

Artists employed illusion to communicate philosophical insight.

Actors performed moral dramas in which virtue triumphed over greed.

These practices enriched society.

No fault lay within them.

Yet among ambitious circles another interpretation emerged.

Some reasoned:

"If appearances can encourage goodness, appearances can also secure advantage.

If presentation shapes judgment, presentation itself becomes power."

Thus arose the first Masks.

At first they were literal ceremonial masks worn during festivals, meditations, and dramatic performances.

Each represented a quality of mind.

One symbolized compassion.

Another patience.

Another courage.

Practitioners would don the masks as reminders that identity itself is conditioned and transient.

The exercise was intended to weaken attachment to ego.

For many years it served this noble purpose.

The Blessed One smiled gently.

"A medicine may heal many before later generations misuse it."

Eventually certain scholars began employing symbolic identities outside ritual settings.

Negotiators concealed personal affiliations to reduce bias.

Investigators withheld names while evaluating disputes.

Judges attempted anonymity so that decisions might rest upon evidence rather than reputation.

Again, these intentions were largely wholesome.

The people praised them.

But hidden within the practice was a temptation.

Some discovered that concealed identity permitted concealed motivation.

Freed from accountability, they spoke more boldly.

Freed from recognition, they manipulated outcomes.

Freed from transparency, they pursued influence while escaping criticism.

The elder Ratnaśīla warned:

"The face hidden for compassion is a veil.

The face hidden for attachment is a prison."

His warning circulated widely.

Yet many admired its poetry more than its meaning.

Then there arose among the Crystal Sages a philosopher named Māyadṛṣṭi, Illusory Vision.

He argued:

"All identity is constructed.

Therefore no representation should be judged more authentic than another."

The first half of his teaching reflected a profound insight into conditioned existence.

But many disciples misunderstood.

Instead of loosening attachment, they concluded:

"If identity is constructed, sincerity itself is optional."

Thus emptiness was confused with moral indifference.

The Blessed One turned toward Sāgaramati and said:

"This is a common error among those who hear of emptiness without compassion.

They suppose that because phenomena lack inherent existence, actions lack consequences.

Yet karma functions precisely because phenomena arise dependently.

The one who mistakes emptiness for license falls into deeper bondage."

Then the Blessed One spoke these verses:

The actor who forgets the stage
Becomes lost in the role.

The dreamer who forgets awakening
Mistakes shadows for substance.

Wear no mask
That you cannot remove
Before your own conscience.

As decades became centuries, ceremonial masks gave way to social masks.

Teachers exaggerated certainty.

Officials exaggerated confidence.

Merchants exaggerated prosperity.

Students exaggerated understanding.

Communities projected images more polished than reality.

Outward harmony continued.

Inward honesty weakened.

Eventually even councils began valuing appearances above substance.

Reports were crafted to reassure rather than to inform.

Failures were concealed lest confidence decline.

Praise became plentiful.

Self-examination became rare.

One humble archivist named Sucandra quietly preserved unaltered records.

Asked why he refused embellishment, he replied:

"A cracked mirror reflects imperfectly.

A polished lie reflects nothing at all."

His manuscripts survived only because a few faithful students copied them in secret.

The Blessed One then manifested another vision.

The assembly beheld crystal halls lined with mirrors.

Citizens entered seeking self-knowledge.

Yet each mirror had been subtly altered.

One magnified beauty.

Another diminished flaws.

Another reflected not the present face but the face the viewer wished to possess.

Many admired the mirrors.

Few sought ordinary reflections.

The Buddha explained:

"Thus it is with the mind under ignorance.

Beings prefer flattering illusions to liberating truth.

Māra need not create false worlds.

It is enough that beings decorate their own delusions."

Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, did any among them preserve authenticity?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"Indeed.

Many householders continued speaking plainly.

Many contemplatives maintained honesty.

Many healers placed truth before reputation.

The Dharma-seeds had not perished.

Though hidden beneath dust, they remained capable of flowering."

Then Akṣobhya revealed the deepest significance of the Masks.

"The true mask is not worn upon the face.

It is worn upon the mind.

Whenever one says:

'I must appear superior.'

'I must appear indispensable.'

'I must appear incapable of error.'

Then one has already forgotten Suchness.

The bodhisattva has no need of such disguises.

Knowing all identities to be conditioned, the bodhisattva neither clings to praise nor fears blame."

The Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Crystal covered with cloth
Still remains crystal.

The moon hidden by clouds
Still remains the moon.

So too Buddha-Nature
Needs no ornament.

Remove the mask.
Polish the heart.
Let Suchness appear
Without embellishment.

When the Blessed One had finished speaking, innumerable bodhisattvas attained deeper realization regarding the union of emptiness and sincerity.

Many devas cast celestial flowers over the assembly.

The nāga kings reflected upon their own subtle disguises and renewed vows of truthful conduct.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed deeply and rejoiced in the teaching.

Book II — The Turning Away from Suchness

Chapter 13

The Doctrine of Superiority

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue to teach in the jeweled assembly of Abhirati.

When the discourse on the Masks of Transformation had ended, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, placed his robe over one shoulder, and bowed before the World-Honored One.

He asked:

"Blessed One, conceit has arisen, the search for dominion has begun, minds have been studied for influence, and appearances have become masks. Yet I perceive that these alone cannot overturn an entire civilization.

By what further cause did the peoples of Raktaloka begin to believe that some beings were inherently above others?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, you inquire into a subtle poison.

A single arrogant thought harms one person.

A doctrine that justifies arrogance harms generations.

Listen carefully."

The assembly became perfectly still.

The jeweled ponds ceased their rippling, and the birds that proclaimed the Dharma rested silently among the branches of wish-fulfilling trees.

Then the Blessed One revealed another vision.

The Crystal Kingdoms still prospered.

Their libraries overflowed with manuscripts.

Their academies welcomed students from every province.

The Covenant of the Two Serpent Peoples formally remained in force.

Peace still prevailed.

Yet beneath these outward conditions, the invisible currents of thought had begun to shift.

Among certain philosophers arose a proposition.

They said:

"Since beings possess different talents, perhaps they possess different intrinsic worth."

At first this opinion found little acceptance.

Many elders objected.

They taught:

"Differences in skill arise from karma and conditions.

Differences in worth do not."

But ambitious scholars found the new proposition attractive.

It flattered the accomplished.

It comforted the powerful.

It justified privilege.

Thus it spread.

The Blessed One declared:

"Sāgaramati, ignorance often clothes itself in the language of reason.

It seeks not merely to boast but to establish its boasting as law."

The Bodhisattva asked:

"How did they persuade so many?"

The Buddha answered:

"They mixed truth with falsehood.

This is among Māra's oldest methods."

The vision focused upon a great academy where renowned lecturers addressed thousands.

One teacher proclaimed:

"Observe the variety among beings.

Some possess stronger memory.

Some greater concentration.

Some superior craftsmanship.

Surely nature itself reveals a hierarchy."

The audience applauded.

Another elder rose and replied:

"Skill differs.

Merit differs.

Karmic conditions differ.

Yet Buddha-Nature is neither greater nor lesser.

A polished jewel and a mud-covered jewel remain jewels."

His words received respectful applause but little enthusiasm.

For the crowd preferred conclusions that elevated themselves.

The Blessed One then spoke:

"When beings desire superiority, they begin searching for arguments to support the desire.

Reason becomes servant rather than master."

As decades passed, the philosophers refined their claims.

Some divided society according to occupation.

Some according to lineage.

Some according to contemplative attainment.

Others according to mastery of crystal disciplines.

Charts were drawn.

Rankings established.

Titles multiplied.

The classifications themselves were not inherently harmful.

Communities often require organization.

But attachment transformed organization into identity.

Identity became status.

Status became value.

Soon many believed that the ranking described ultimate reality rather than temporary convention.

The Blessed One recited:

The ladder is useful
For climbing a roof.

The fool carries it forever
And imagines himself taller.

So too with rank.

Use convention.
Do not worship it.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, what teaching opposed this doctrine?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"The oldest sages continually proclaimed dependent origination.

They taught:

'No being exists independently.

No excellence appears without causes.

No birth fixes destiny.

No condition is permanent.'

Yet because these teachings required humility, many neglected them."

Among the defenders of equality there lived a contemplative named Samadarśin, Equal Vision.

He wandered through villages carrying two objects.

One was an uncut crystal still covered in stone.

The other was a perfectly polished gem.

He would ask children:

"Which contains greater crystal?"

The children always pointed to the polished jewel.

Then he broke away the surrounding rock from the rough stone, revealing another flawless crystal within.

He smiled and said:

"The difference lay not in essence but in appearance."

Many children understood.

Many adults did not.

The Blessed One smiled gently.

"Children often grasp Suchness before scholars complicate it."

As the generations continued, the Doctrine of Superiority entered public life.

Schools for elite students received greater resources.

Prestigious lineages married among themselves.

Certain councils reserved membership for celebrated families.

Even meditation halls quietly separated practitioners according to reputation.

No decree declared others inferior.

Yet assumptions hardened into custom.

The people ceased noticing them.

The Buddha said:

"When injustice becomes ordinary, many cease calling it injustice."

Then the vision shifted.

The assembly saw merchants refusing apprentices from humble backgrounds.

Officials ignoring wise counsel from unknown villagers.

Teachers dismissing sincere students while favoring those of distinguished ancestry.

The losses were immeasurable.

Potential bodhisattvas went unheard.

Great discoveries remained hidden.

Acts of compassion were overlooked because they emerged from obscure persons.

Meanwhile vanity flourished in honored places.

Sāgaramati bowed his head.

He asked:

"Did none challenge these developments?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Many challenged them.

But they did so without anger."

There arose an elder nun named Padmāśrī who welcomed all students equally.

When criticized, she answered:

"The lotus blooms in clear ponds and muddy ponds alike.

It asks neither the ancestry of the water nor the reputation of the soil."

Her community became known for extraordinary kindness.

Some mocked it as naïve.

Yet many future sages emerged from among her disciples.

The Blessed One praised her conduct.

Then he addressed the assembly:

"The bodhisattva measures beings not by status but by suffering.

Not by fame but by capacity for awakening.

Not by lineage but by compassion."

At that moment innumerable lotus blossoms appeared throughout Abhirati.

Each blossom contained reflections of beings from countless worlds:

devas and humans,

animals and nāgas,

wealthy and poor,

scholars and laborers,

kings and wanderers.

Within every blossom shone the same clear light.

The Blessed One said:

"See this and understand.

Conditions differ.

Appearances differ.

Karma differs.

But Suchness neither increases nor decreases.

The mirror reflects every face without preference."

Then he taught in verse:

The sun withholds no light
From valley or mountain.

The rain avoids no field
Because weeds grow there.

So too the Dharma
Rejects no being.

Only the deluded mind
Invents superiority.

As the Doctrine of Superiority matured, subtle compassion weakened.

Those considered eminent received patience.

Those considered ordinary received judgment.

Those considered insignificant became nearly invisible.

The greatest tragedy was not cruelty.

It was indifference.

For indifference allowed suffering to continue unnoticed.

The Blessed One then revealed the karmic consequence.

Beings who believed themselves inherently superior developed increasing fear.

They feared decline.

They feared association with the humble.

They feared losing prestige.

Thus the doctrine intended to secure status instead multiplied anxiety.

The lowly suffered exclusion.

The exalted suffered attachment.

Neither attained peace.

The Buddha concluded:

"Sāgaramati, know this well.

The highest seat in saṃsāra remains within saṃsāra.

The lowest seat in saṃsāra remains within saṃsāra.

The bodhisattva seeks neither.

Instead, the bodhisattva sits upon the seat of emptiness, from which compassion extends equally in every direction.

When a civilization forgets this, it begins constructing invisible thrones.

And where invisible thrones arise, invisible chains soon follow."

When these words were spoken, countless bodhisattvas realized profound impartial compassion.

Many devas relinquished subtle pride.

The nāga kings bowed until their foreheads touched the jeweled earth.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rejoiced and praised the inconceivable wisdom of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book II — The Turning Away from Suchness

Chapter 14

The Division of the Serpent Clans

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse in the assembly of Abhirati.

After the teaching on the Doctrine of Superiority, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before the World-Honored One and asked:

"Blessed One, the Jalānāgas and the Vajrāṅga Nāgas once entered into a covenant of friendship and mutual learning. Their sages exchanged teachings, their artisans shared knowledge, and their children grew up regarding one another as kin. How, then, did such fellowship become division?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, no covenant is broken by stone before it is broken in the heart.

Walls are raised first in thought, then in speech, and only later in the world.

Listen carefully."

Then the Tathāgata revealed another vision.

The assembly beheld the Crimson Realm during the later years of its prosperity.

The seas still sparkled beneath the red heavens.

The Crystal Kingdoms remained splendid.

The academies continued to welcome students from distant lands.

Yet conversations had begun to change.

Where elders once said, "Our people flourish together," younger voices increasingly asked,

"Whose tradition contributed more?"

The question seemed innocent.

But it carried hidden attachment.

Among the Jalānāgas there arose scholars who celebrated the intuitive communion of the oceans.

They taught:

"Our ancestors discovered the subtle sympathy of minds.

Without us, the sciences of contemplation would never have flowered."

Among the Vajrāṅga Nāgas there arose philosophers who replied:

"Our forebears disciplined those discoveries through crystal meditation.

Without us, raw intuition would have remained primitive."

Neither statement was wholly false.

Neither was wholly true.

Each grasped one thread and mistook it for the tapestry.

The Blessed One said:

"When partial truth serves conceit, it becomes a gateway to delusion."

At first the debates remained cordial.

Great symposiums were held where representatives from both traditions exchanged arguments with courtesy.

The audience applauded learning.

Friendships endured.

But over time spectators cared less for understanding and more for victory.

Teachers became champions.

Schools became factions.

Students inherited rivalries they had never personally experienced.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, why do beings cling so fiercely to groups?"

The Buddha answered:

"Because the imagined self expands.

One who loosens attachment to the individual self may yet cling to family.

One who loosens attachment to family may cling to tribe.

One who loosens attachment to tribe may cling to nation.

One who loosens attachment to nation may cling to ideology.

So long as ignorance persists, the self merely changes garments."

Then the Blessed One recited:

The serpent sheds its skin
Yet remains a serpent.

The ego sheds one label
And grasps another.

Only wisdom
Sheds grasping itself.

As years passed, historians rewrote chronicles to favor their own communities.

The Jalānāga archives emphasized the virtues of the oceans while passing lightly over desert achievements.

The Vajrāṅga records magnified the accomplishments of the crystal cities while neglecting the discoveries of the seas.

Neither side fabricated entirely.

Rather, each selected memory according to attachment.

Thus history itself became conditioned by craving.

There lived at that time an archivist named Dharmalekha, Keeper of Records.

He compared manuscripts from many provinces and discovered growing discrepancies.

When questioned by his students, he said:

"Memory purified by humility becomes wisdom.

Memory governed by pride becomes propaganda."

His words circulated quietly among sincere scholars but found little favor among ambitious officials.

Meanwhile merchants began organizing according to regional loyalties.

Guilds preferred members from familiar lineages.

Pilgrims increasingly visited shrines associated with their own traditions while neglecting those of their neighbors.

Festivals once celebrated jointly became separate observances held on different days.

The outward changes appeared minor.

The inward consequences were profound.

The Blessed One declared:

"Sāgaramati, beings imagine that division begins with hostility.

More often it begins with preference hardened into identity."

Then there arose a dispute concerning the education of young contemplatives.

Ocean teachers emphasized empathy and shared perception.

Desert teachers emphasized discipline and precision.

Wise elders urged combining both methods.

Yet partisans insisted upon exclusivity.

Some proclaimed:

"Only our way produces genuine understanding."

Others answered:

"Only our tradition preserves true excellence."

The assembly watching the vision sighed.

For they saw that both approaches possessed merit when united and weakness when isolated.

The Buddha explained:

"Dependent origination teaches mutual support.

Pride teaches mutual exclusion.

Thus pride contradicts the Dharma."

A wandering sage named Maitrigupta traveled between settlements carrying two staffs.

One was carved from coral gathered beneath the seas.

The other was fashioned from crystal found beneath the mountains.

When asked which he preferred, he bound them together with cord and leaned upon both.

He said:

"Separate, either may break.

Together, each strengthens the other."

Some laughed at his simplicity.

Others understood.

His example later became a treasured parable among those who resisted sectarianism.

Yet the current of division continued to deepen.

Public honors increasingly recognized local heroes while neglecting shared benefactors.

Songs praising unity faded from popularity.

Poems celebrating regional glory multiplied.

Children memorized tales in which their ancestors invariably appeared wiser, braver, or more virtuous than their neighbors.

Few intended malice.

Most sincerely loved their heritage.

But affection without perspective slowly narrowed into attachment.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, did the Covenant itself fail?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"The words of the Covenant remained inscribed upon crystal tablets.

Its ceremonies continued.

Its anniversaries were celebrated.

Yet many honored the inscription while forgetting the intention.

The shell endured.

The spirit weakened.

Thus forms survived while wisdom diminished."

The Blessed One then taught this verse:

A bridge neglected
Still appears strong
Until the traveler steps upon it.

A vow repeated
Without understanding
Is only sound upon the wind.

Renew intention daily,
And the ancient covenant
Lives within the heart.

The vision shifted once more.

The assembly saw a gathering of elderly sages from both peoples meeting secretly in a quiet valley.

Perceiving the growing estrangement, they composed a declaration:

"Let no Nāga despise another on account of region, lineage, occupation, or school.

For all arise through conditions,
All pass through conditions,
And all possess the capacity to awaken."

Copies were distributed widely.

Some communities received them with gratitude.

Others dismissed them as relics of an earlier age.

Thus the opportunity for reconciliation remained, but was only partially embraced.

The Blessed One looked compassionately upon Sāgaramati.

"The division of the Serpent Clans did not occur because they ceased sharing blood, trade, or language.

It occurred because they ceased seeing one another through the lens of dependent origination.

When beings imagine separate essences, they forget interdependence.

When interdependence is forgotten, suspicion arises.

Where suspicion grows unchecked, fear is never far behind."

Then he concluded:

"Remember well, O Sāgaramati.

The Jalānāgas and the Vajrāṅga Nāgas never truly became separate.

Only their deluded perceptions divided them.

Suchness remained undivided throughout.

Likewise, all beings wandering in saṃsāra appear fragmented by ignorance, yet in reality none exist independently.

The bodhisattva therefore works tirelessly to heal divisions—not by erasing differences, but by revealing their empty and interdependent nature."

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained deeper realization of non-duality.

Many devas shed tears of compassion.

The nāga kings renewed ancient vows of fellowship.

And the entire assembly rejoiced in the profound Dharma proclaimed by Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book II — The Turning Away from Suchness

Chapter 15

The First Harvest of Fear

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati, having heard of the Division of the Serpent Clans, bowed respectfully and asked:

"World-Honored One, by what causes did the peoples of Raktaloka first discover the use of fear as an instrument? For fear is a painful state, and yet some later traditions speak as though it became a source of power."

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, fear has no substance of its own.

It is a conditioned arising.

When ignorance encounters uncertainty, fear appears.

When wisdom encounters uncertainty, investigation appears.

The difference lies not in circumstances but in the cultivation of the mind."

Then the Blessed One emitted a ray of sapphire light, and the assembly beheld another vision of the Crimson Realm.

Though outward prosperity remained, invisible tensions had begun to accumulate.

The rivalry between schools increased.

Communities interpreted innocent actions with suspicion.

Rumors spread more quickly than understanding.

People became anxious about losing influence, reputation, or security.

The Buddha said:

"Where attachment grows, fear follows as its shadow.

One who possesses nothing has little to defend.

One who clings to everything trembles continually."

In those days there lived among the Crystal Kingdoms a contemplative named Sucittamati, whose studies concerned the subtle movements of emotion.

He observed that frightened assemblies acted differently from peaceful assemblies.

A fearful crowd gathered tightly.

It accepted simple explanations.

It sought strong leaders.

It surrendered careful reflection in exchange for certainty.

Sucittamati recorded these observations and wrote:

"Let those who guide others first calm fear within themselves, lest they multiply delusion."

His intention was wholesome.

His manuscript counseled compassion.

Yet after his death, ambitious readers preserved the observations while neglecting the warnings.

Some reasoned:

"If fear changes behavior so reliably, perhaps it can be employed for beneficial purposes."

Thus they organized public exercises intended to prepare communities for disaster.

Simulated emergencies were staged.

Warnings were issued.

Citizens practiced coordinated responses.

Many lives were later saved by such preparations.

The Blessed One declared:

"Preparation guided by compassion is skillful.

But attachment eagerly borrows the tools of wisdom."

As generations passed, officials noticed another effect.

When danger was announced, disputes temporarily ceased.

Rival factions cooperated.

Resources were willingly surrendered.

Public confidence concentrated around central authorities.

Some administrators concluded:

"Shared fear creates unity."

This conclusion was only partially true.

Fear can gather beings together.

But it gathers them as a storm drives leaves into a corner, not as wisdom unites companions upon the Path.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, when did error first arise?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"When some ceased asking whether fear should be relieved and began asking whether fear might be maintained."

The assembly fell silent.

The vision revealed councils where strategists debated public messaging.

One elder advised:

"Speak plainly.

Explain conditions.

Trust the discernment of the people."

Another proposed:

"If concern fades too quickly, discipline will decline.

Perhaps anxiety should be prolonged."

The proposal was accepted in certain regions.

At first the consequences appeared favorable.

Order increased.

Compliance increased.

Public ceremonies drew larger crowds.

Yet beneath the surface another harvest was taking place.

Children slept uneasily.

Neighbors regarded strangers with caution.

Merchants exaggerated dangers to attract patronage.

Teachers emphasized catastrophe rather than wisdom.

Though no fields were planted with terror, fear began reproducing itself within countless minds.

Then there arose a philosopher named Karuṇasena who publicly challenged these developments.

He stood before the High Council and declared:

"You believe you cultivate stability.

In truth you cultivate dependence.

You believe you harvest obedience.

In truth you harvest suffering.

The frightened obey today but carry wounds into tomorrow."

Many applauded politely.

Few altered their conduct.

For fear had become convenient.

The Blessed One then recited:

One who plants rice
Harvests rice.

One who plants barley
Harvests barley.

One who plants fear
Harvests only more fear.

Though the crop appears abundant,
Its fruit cannot satisfy.

As decades became centuries, subtle practitioners discovered another phenomenon.

Strong emotions left impressions upon surrounding minds.

Communities long exposed to anxiety became easier to agitate again.

Habitual alarm conditioned future alarm.

This was no mystical substance to be collected, nor an essence to be consumed.

Rather, it was a karmic pattern: minds repeatedly trained toward grasping and aversion became increasingly susceptible to both.

Yet among later generations this truth was misunderstood.

Some ambitious theorists proclaimed:

"Fear itself is a resource.

If properly cultivated, it strengthens institutions and extends influence."

The Buddha shook his head gently.

"They mistook dependence for strength.

They mistook agitation for vitality.

They mistook the smoke for the fire."

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati then asked:

"World-Honored One, did all the peoples of Raktaloka accept this doctrine?"

The Blessed One answered:

"By no means.

Many rejected it.

Householders comforted frightened neighbors.

Meditators taught mindfulness of breathing.

Healers cared for those overcome by anxiety.

Parents reassured their children.

The seeds of bodhicitta remained alive.

Indeed, whenever fear spread, compassionate beings arose to lessen it.

Know this well: delusion never possesses the final word."

Then the Blessed One revealed a humble village by the western sea.

There lived an elderly Jalānāga woman called Sāgaramātā by the local people.

Whenever rumors of disaster spread, she gathered the children beneath a flowering tree.

She did not deny danger.

Neither did she magnify it.

Instead she taught:

"Observe the breath.

Speak truthfully.

Help one another.

Whatever conditions arise, meet them with compassion."

Generations later, her descendants remembered not the frightening events but the peace she had embodied.

The Blessed One praised her before the assembly:

"Such persons are hidden bodhisattvas.

They extinguish fires before kingdoms notice smoke."

Finally, Akṣobhya looked upon Sāgaramati and declared:

"The First Harvest of Fear did not consist in consuming fear as though it were a substance.

Its true nature was subtler and more tragic.

Certain beings discovered that frightened minds could be directed more easily than tranquil minds.

Instead of healing fear, they preserved it.

Instead of liberating beings, they benefited from their confusion.

Thus they harvested the karmic fruits of anxiety while sowing further suffering for themselves and others.

Yet even those who wandered down this path never lost Buddha-Nature.

Like jewels buried beneath crimson sands, their luminous essence remained concealed but undestroyed.

Therefore the bodhisattva despairs of no being."

When these words were spoken, countless bodhisattvas generated even greater compassion for all who manipulate through fear and all who suffer beneath it.

The devas scattered celestial flowers.

The nāga kings lowered their heads.

The entire assembly praised the inconceivable wisdom of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book II — The Turning Away from Suchness

Chapter 16

The Rejection of Compassion

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue the discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in Abhirati.

When the teaching on the First Harvest of Fear had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his seat, bowed with palms joined, and asked:

"World-Honored One, if the peoples of Raktaloka had once cultivated generosity, meditation, fellowship, and learning, and if many still possessed noble intentions, how did they come to reject compassion itself? Surely even a deluded mind remembers kindness."

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, compassion is rarely rejected openly.

More often it is declared impractical.

It is called weakness by those who fear vulnerability.

It is called inefficiency by those who worship results.

It is called sentimentality by those who have forgotten interdependence.

Thus beings abandon the heart while believing themselves rational."

The assembly listened in profound silence.

The jeweled lakes of Abhirati reflected the face of the Tathāgata without distortion, and even the celestial birds ceased their melodious recitations.

Then the Blessed One revealed another vision.

The assembly beheld the Crimson Realm after many generations of increasing pride and subtle manipulation.

The cities remained magnificent.

The Crystal Kingdoms still glittered beneath the red heavens.

The academies continued to instruct students in meditation, ethics, and philosophy.

Yet a new spirit had entered public discourse.

Success was praised above kindness.

Influence above humility.

Order above mercy.

Many still spoke of compassion.

Fewer practiced it when sacrifice was required.

The Blessed One said:

"Words may preserve the memory of virtue long after the virtue itself has faded."

Among the learned circles there arose a school of thought known as the Calculators.

Its members did not deny morality.

Instead they argued:

"Every decision should be judged solely by measurable outcomes.

If suffering imposed upon a few secures prosperity for many, it is justified.

If fear produces stability, it is beneficial.

If deception preserves order, it is acceptable."

Many admired their reasoning.

Their arguments appeared elegant.

Their calculations seemed precise.

But they neglected one thing.

The immeasurable dignity of sentient beings.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, wherein lay their error?"

The Buddha answered:

"They counted resources but not tears.

They measured productivity but not loneliness.

They weighed efficiency but not wisdom.

Most of all, they treated beings as instruments rather than companions upon the Path."

Then the Blessed One spoke in verse:

He who counts only numbers
Cannot measure sorrow.

She who measures only gain
Cannot weigh compassion.

The bodhisattva's ledger
Has but one entry:

May all beings awaken.

As the Calculators gained influence, public institutions changed.

Hospitals remained open, but healing was increasingly allocated according to prestige.

Education remained available, but the most gifted were favored while the struggling were neglected.

Aid was offered where visible success could be demonstrated, while quiet suffering often went unseen.

No proclamation announced these policies.

They emerged from countless practical decisions.

Thus indifference disguised itself as prudence.

The Buddha continued:

"Sāgaramati, ignorance often clothes itself in respectable garments."

Then there appeared in the vision an elderly Jalānāga physician named Maitrīśrī.

She treated the wealthy and the poor alike.

When criticized for wasting resources upon those unlikely to repay society, she answered:

"I do not heal because merit has been earned.

I heal because suffering is present."

Her students asked:

"Master, what if kindness is exploited?"

She replied:

"Then wisdom must accompany kindness.

But let wisdom protect compassion, never replace it."

Her teaching spread quietly among healers but was seldom quoted in the great academies.

For it lacked novelty.

It possessed only truth.

Meanwhile the Crystal Sages developed increasingly sophisticated systems for prediction and governance.

They could estimate harvests, population movements, and social unrest with astonishing accuracy.

Many believed every aspect of civilization could eventually be optimized.

One influential scholar proclaimed before the High Council:

"When enough knowledge is gathered, compassion will become unnecessary.

Perfect systems will eliminate suffering."

The Blessed One paused.

Then he addressed Sāgaramati.

"This statement contained both hope and delusion.

Systems may reduce hardship.

Institutions may encourage justice.

Yet no arrangement of conditions can substitute for the awakened heart.

A hungry traveler needs bread.

A grieving traveler needs companionship.

A frightened traveler needs courage.

No mechanism can generate boundless compassion in place of living beings."

The assembly rejoiced at these words.

Then the vision shifted again.

A severe drought struck several provinces of Raktaloka.

Resources became strained.

The councils convened.

Many advocated equitable sharing.

Others argued that only the strongest regions should be preserved.

Lengthy debates followed.

At last an unknown monk entered the assembly.

His robes were worn.

His bowl was cracked.

No one recognized his lineage.

He bowed and spoke only these words:

"If prosperity purchased through abandonment of the weak is called success, then the word itself has forgotten its meaning."

Having spoken, he departed.

Some mocked him.

Some ignored him.

A few quietly changed their votes.

The Blessed One smiled gently.

"Thus hidden bodhisattvas continue their work."

Then Akṣobhya revealed the deepest corruption.

Among certain influential circles arose the belief that compassion itself impeded progress.

Mercy was portrayed as hesitation.

Patience as inefficiency.

Forgiveness as weakness.

Some even taught young students:

"The wise remain detached from the sufferings of ordinary beings."

This doctrine spread because it flattered pride.

The Buddha declared:

"They confused equanimity with indifference.

True equanimity embraces all beings equally.

Indifference abandons them."

Then he recited:

The physician unmoved by panic
May still be moved by love.

The judge free from anger
May still be guided by mercy.

The sage beyond attachment
Does not stand beyond compassion.

For emptiness
Without compassion
Is misunderstood emptiness.

There lived at that time a humble Desert Nāga gardener named Padmaka.

He cultivated flowers beside a public road.

Travelers asked why he spent so much effort on blossoms that earned no profit.

He answered:

"Those burdened by sorrow also deserve beauty."

Generations passed through his garden.

Many forgot his name.

Few forgot the peace they experienced there.

The Blessed One praised him:

"Know that planting a flower with pure intention may accumulate merit greater than constructing a palace for vanity."

As the years continued, the rejection of compassion became subtle rather than explicit.

Public ceremonies praised benevolence.

Schools displayed inscriptions celebrating kindness.

Councils recited ancient vows.

Yet daily decisions increasingly favored status over service and calculation over care.

The shell of virtue remained.

Its living spirit grew faint.

Sāgaramati then asked:

"World-Honored One, how may future generations avoid this error?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Remember always that wisdom and compassion are like the two wings of a great bird.

With wisdom alone it circles endlessly.

With compassion alone it cannot rise.

United, they cross the ocean of saṃsāra.

Separated, they perish."

Then the Tathāgata concluded:

"The peoples of Raktaloka did not lose compassion because they hated goodness.

They lost compassion because they gradually convinced themselves that greatness required its sacrifice.

This was their gravest misunderstanding.

For the highest greatness is the bodhisattva who willingly postpones personal peace so that even the smallest creature may move one step closer to awakening.

Know therefore that any civilization abandoning compassion has already begun abandoning itself."

When the Blessed One had spoken these words, innumerable bodhisattvas generated boundless loving-kindness toward all worlds.

The devas wept tears that became jeweled lotuses.

The nāga kings bowed until their crowns touched the sapphire ground of Abhirati.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rejoiced, and the entire assembly praised the inconceivable wisdom of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book III — The Coming to Earth

Chapter 17

The Observation of the Human Realm

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in Abhirati.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati, having heard the account of the Rejection of Compassion, bowed respectfully before the World-Honored One and asked:

"Blessed One, how did the peoples of Raktaloka first become aware of the human realm? And why did their attention turn away from their own world toward another?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, beings who seek wisdom look outward in order to cultivate compassion.

Beings who seek power look outward in order to enlarge themselves.

The act may appear the same.

The intention determines its karmic fruit."

Then the Tathāgata emitted a ray of sapphire light, illuminating countless world-systems. Within that radiance the assembly beheld innumerable realms arising and passing away according to causes and conditions.

Some worlds were filled with devas intoxicated by pleasure.

Some were inhabited by fierce asuras constantly contending for victory.

Some contained vast assemblies of nāgas dwelling beneath jewel seas.

Some had already received the teaching of Buddhas.

Others had never heard even the faintest echo of the Dharma.

The Blessed One said:

"The universe is immeasurable.

No single world stands at its center.

No realm exists independently.

Each arises through dependent origination, sustained by karma and conditions.

Raktaloka was but one among countless realms.

Likewise, the human world was but one among countless fields of rebirth."

At that time the Crystal Sages of Raktaloka had perfected instruments of contemplation capable of perceiving distant world-systems through profound meditative concentration.

These instruments were not mechanical devices but sanctuaries of stillness, where disciplined minds entered deep absorption and beheld visions conditioned by karma.

Many practitioners used them wisely.

They contemplated impermanence across the cosmos.

They witnessed civilizations rise and fall.

They generated compassion for suffering beings.

But others looked with different intentions.

One ambitious philosopher declared:

"If knowledge of distant realms can be obtained, should not their histories also become available to us?

If their histories become available, should not their patterns be studied?

If their patterns are studied, should not they be influenced for beneficial purposes?"

Many applauded his reasoning.

Few questioned the final assumption.

Then there arose among the elder contemplatives one known as Śāntisāgara, Ocean of Peace.

He warned:

"The farther the eye sees, the more carefully the heart must walk.

Distance enlarges responsibility, not entitlement."

His disciples treasured these words.

Yet younger scholars often quoted only the first phrase:

"The farther the eye sees."

Thus even caution became fuel for ambition.

The Blessed One recited:

He who climbs a mountain
May behold many valleys.

Yet seeing a valley
Does not make it his possession.

The moon reflects
In every lake.

Yet belongs
To none.

As centuries passed, reports concerning a certain distant realm multiplied.

It was called by many names among the sages, but eventually they agreed to refer to it simply as the Human Realm.

The observations astonished them.

Its inhabitants were physically fragile.

Their lives were brief.

Their bodies lacked the resilience of the nāgas.

Their memories were uncertain.

Their civilizations rose and fell with startling rapidity.

Yet they possessed something remarkable.

Again and again, from among ordinary people there emerged sages who renounced wealth for truth, rulers who abandoned conquest for justice, wanderers who sacrificed comfort for compassion, and seekers who pursued awakening despite adversity.

The Crystal Sages debated this mystery.

Some asked:

"How can such short-lived beings cultivate such profound aspirations?"

Others wondered:

"Why do these mortals endure suffering with such determination?"

The wisest among them replied:

"Precisely because they know impermanence so intimately."

The Blessed One turned to Sāgaramati.

"The human condition is difficult.

Yet difficulty often becomes fertile ground for bodhicitta.

Pleasure may encourage complacency.

Power may encourage pride.

Impermanence, rightly understood, encourages awakening."

The vision shifted.

The assembly beheld humans caring for aging parents, strangers rescuing one another from danger, ascetics meditating beneath trees, physicians tending the sick without expectation of reward, and children sharing food during famine.

Many devas watching alongside the assembly marveled.

For though these humans possessed little worldly power, acts of immeasurable merit arose among them.

The Buddha declared:

"Judge not beings by longevity.

Judge not beings by appearance.

Judge not beings by psychic ability.

A single moment of genuine compassion outweighs a century of self-serving brilliance."

Then there arose in Raktaloka a great council to discuss these discoveries.

The elder sages proposed:

"Let us learn from the virtues of the Human Realm.

Though they possess little, they often cling less.

Though they suffer much, many cultivate patience.

Though they die quickly, they remember urgency."

But another faction replied:

"If such beings are so impressionable, they may become ideal subjects for the study of social development."

The chamber grew quiet.

Some objected.

Others remained uncertain.

The seeds planted generations earlier had now begun to bear visible fruit.

The language of fellowship slowly gave way to the language of observation.

The language of observation slowly drifted toward the language of management.

Śāntisāgara rose one final time before the council and proclaimed:

"Every sentient being is a companion in saṃsāra, not an object of experimentation.

Look upon them as future Buddhas, and your heart will remain pure.

Look upon them as instruments, and your own mind will become an instrument of Māra."

Many honored the elder.

Few followed his counsel completely.

The Blessed One then spoke these verses:

See every stranger
As one who has wept.

See every enemy
As one who has feared.

See every creature
As one who seeks happiness.

Then compassion
Will arise naturally.

The assembly in Abhirati became deeply moved.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed and asked:

"Blessed One, what was the greatest misunderstanding made by those who observed the Human Realm?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"They mistook vulnerability for inferiority.

Yet the human birth is exceedingly precious.

Because it balances suffering and opportunity, confusion and clarity, limitation and aspiration, it is uniquely suited for hearing the Dharma and cultivating the Path.

Many devas envy the opportunity of human birth.

Many nāgas fail to recognize its value."

Then the Tathāgata concluded:

"Thus the peoples of Raktaloka first turned their attention toward the Human Realm.

Some looked with reverence.

Some looked with curiosity.

Some looked with compassion.

Some looked with ambition.

The world they beheld did not determine their karma.

The intention with which they beheld it did.

Remember this always, Sāgaramati:

The eye does not bind beings.

Craving binds beings.

Vision does not imprison the mind.

Attachment to vision does.

Therefore behold all worlds through the mirror of Suchness, and no realm will become an object of domination."

When the Blessed One had spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated deeper compassion for beings in every world-system.

The devas scattered celestial flowers over the assembly.

The nāga kings praised the rarity and preciousness of human birth.

And all rejoiced in the teaching proclaimed by Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book III — The Coming to Earth

Chapter 18

The Wonder of Human Buddha-Nature

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue the sacred discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Observation of the Human Realm had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose, bowed at the feet of the Tathāgata, and asked:

"World-Honored One, if the inhabitants of Raktaloka possessed long lives, subtle powers, disciplined minds, and magnificent civilizations, why were they astonished by human beings, who are frail, short-lived, and often overcome by suffering?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, because they looked first with the eyes of comparison and only later with the eyes of wisdom.

Those who measure greatness by power misunderstand the Dharma.

Those who measure greatness by awakening perceive correctly.

Listen carefully."

The assembly became silent.

Then the Blessed One revealed another vision.

The sages of Raktaloka directed their contemplative instruments toward the Human Realm over many generations.

At first they observed only its outward characteristics.

They saw bodies subject to illness.

They saw kingdoms rise and fall.

They saw families divided by grief.

They saw labor, hunger, old age, and death.

Some among them laughed.

They said:

"Surely these beings are unfortunate beyond measure.

How weak their limbs.

How brief their years.

How uncertain their memory."

Others remained thoughtful.

For they noticed something else.

In villages struck by famine, neighbors shared their last stores of food.

In times of plague, physicians remained among the sick despite risking their own lives.

Parents willingly endured hardship for their children.

Monastics renounced comfort in pursuit of truth.

Hermits sat alone in forests seeking liberation not only for themselves but for all sentient beings.

These actions puzzled the observers.

The Blessed One said:

"The eye that sees only suffering concludes that humanity is pitiable.

The eye that sees bodhicitta concludes that humanity is precious."

Then there arose among the Crystal Sages a learned contemplative named Jñānadīpa, Lamp of Wisdom.

He devoted many decades to studying the conduct of humans.

When he presented his findings before the academies, many expected a catalogue of deficiencies.

Instead he declared:

"Their weakness conceals extraordinary strength.

Because they know death is near, they ask urgent questions.

Because they experience sorrow, they understand compassion.

Because they cannot rely upon long centuries, they often choose swiftly between greed and generosity.

Do not underestimate them."

His words stirred debate.

One philosopher objected:

"They possess no great telepathy.

They command no crystal resonances.

Their sciences remain primitive.

How can they be considered remarkable?"

Jñānadīpa answered:

"A being who comforts a grieving stranger has already manifested a power greater than many who move stones with the mind."

The Blessed One smiled.

"Sāgaramati, this answer approached the Dharma."

Then the Tathāgata spoke in verse:

Better than seeing
Across a thousand leagues

Is seeing
The suffering before you.

Better than hearing
A distant thought

Is hearing
The cry of one in pain.

Better than shaping crystal
With concentration

Is shaping the heart
With compassion.

The vision changed.

The assembly beheld a humble human monastery in a distant valley.

Its buildings were plain.

Its robes were worn.

Its food was simple.

Yet every morning the practitioners dedicated merit to beings they would never meet.

Every evening they prayed for enemies as sincerely as for friends.

Watching this, several young Nāga scholars became confused.

They asked their instructors:

"What benefit do these humans gain by wishing happiness for strangers?"

An elder replied:

"Perhaps they have misunderstood self-interest."

Another elder quietly answered:

"Or perhaps they have understood it more deeply than we."

The Blessed One continued:

"There is no contradiction between wisdom and compassion.

To perceive dependent origination clearly is to realize that the welfare of others cannot ultimately be separated from one's own."

As years passed, certain sages of Raktaloka became fascinated not by human technology or politics but by their spiritual potential.

They compiled records of ordinary people who attained extraordinary virtue.

They studied mendicants who forgave persecutors.

Teachers who educated orphans.

Healers who accepted no payment.

Judges who refused bribes.

Farmers who shared harvests during drought.

The more they observed, the more perplexed they became.

For these deeds often arose from individuals possessing no special abilities.

One Crystal Sage remarked:

"If such compassion can arise in beings with so little power, what excuse remains for us?"

The statement spread widely.

Some received it with humility.

Others with irritation.

For praise of humanity seemed, to certain proud minds, an insult to Raktaloka.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati then asked:

"Blessed One, did any among the Red Nāgas perceive the Buddha-Nature within humans?"

The Buddha replied:

"Indeed.

A small number perceived it dimly, though they lacked the full teaching.

One among them was the elder Suvarṇanetra, Golden Eye.

After long contemplation he wrote:

'There exists within these fleeting beings a luminosity not explained by learning, status, or ability.

It appears when they forget themselves for the sake of another.

Perhaps this hidden jewel is the source from which all virtue springs.'

He approached the truth."

The Blessed One then revealed a marvelous sign.

Within the vision every human being, whether king or servant, child or elder, healthy or sick, momentarily appeared as a radiant lotus with an unopened center of light.

The petals differed.

The colors differed.

Some blooms were large.

Some small.

Some weathered by storms.

Yet at the heart of each shone the same golden brilliance.

The Tathāgata said:

"This is a symbol only.

The light represents not an immortal self but the capacity of all beings to awaken when ignorance is abandoned.

Call it Buddha-Nature, Tathāgatagarbha, or the seed of enlightenment.

It cannot be bought.

It cannot be inherited.

It cannot be monopolized.

It appears equally among the humble and the exalted."

Then he recited:

Do not seek the Buddha
Only in jeweled halls.

Do not seek the Buddha
Only in learned speech.

Seek where compassion flowers
Without expectation.

There the hidden jewel
Begins to shine.

The vision next showed a debate within the High Council of Raktaloka.

One faction proposed continued respectful observation of humanity.

Another argued that humans should eventually be guided for their own benefit.

A third remained silent, reflecting deeply.

At last the aged Śāntisāgara spoke:

"If you approach them as teachers, you may learn.

If you approach them as equals, you may befriend them.

If you approach them as possessions, you will lose yourselves."

Many honored his wisdom.

Yet ambitious minds heard only opportunity.

For if humans possessed such latent greatness, they reasoned, then influencing humanity might shape the destiny of countless future ages.

Thus admiration itself became entangled with attachment.

The Blessed One looked upon Sāgaramati with compassion.

"Even reverence may become craving if divorced from emptiness.

Therefore the bodhisattva admires virtue without wishing to possess it."

Finally, Akṣobhya declared:

"The greatest error of certain Red Nāga scholars was not that they underestimated humanity.

It was that, after recognizing humanity's extraordinary potential, they sought to understand it primarily in order to direct it.

The proper response to another's Buddha-Nature is veneration.

The improper response is appropriation.

Remember this distinction well."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Before the beggar,
Bow to Buddha-Nature.

Before the child,
Bow to Buddha-Nature.

Before the stranger,
Bow to Buddha-Nature.

Before the enemy,
Bow to Buddha-Nature.

For though clouds differ,
The open sky
Remains unchanged.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained deeper realization of the universal capacity for awakening.

The devas scattered jeweled blossoms throughout Abhirati.

The nāga kings placed their crowns upon the sapphire ground in reverence.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rejoiced exceedingly, and the whole assembly praised the immeasurable wisdom and compassion of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book III — The Coming to Earth

Chapter 19

The Secret Descent

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly gathered in Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Wonder of Human Buddha-Nature had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose, joined his palms, and bowed deeply before the World-Honored One.

He then asked:

"Blessed One, having observed the Human Realm from afar, by what causes did certain beings of Raktaloka seek to journey there? And how should such accounts be understood within the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, know first that beings wander through innumerable realms according to karma. Some are reborn through wholesome deeds, others through unwholesome deeds, and still others through the force of vows. No one crosses from world to world by an independent self, for no

such self exists. Streams of consciousness continue according to causes and conditions.

What later generations called the 'Secret Descent' was not the migration of an eternal essence, but the subtle movement of karmic streams and the hidden influence of intention."

The assembly listened with undivided attention.

Then the Blessed One manifested another vision.

The Crystal Kingdoms had entered an age of extraordinary inquiry.

Councils of contemplatives assembled beneath domes of translucent crystal to discuss the significance of the Human Realm.

Among them arose two dispositions.

The first declared:

"Let us contemplate these beings from afar and dedicate merit for their welfare."

The second declared:

"Let us draw near, learn their ways directly, and perhaps guide their development."

The difference between the two seemed slight.

Yet the Buddha explained:

"The first was rooted chiefly in compassion.

The second contained compassion mixed with subtle conceit.

Mixed karma bears mixed fruit."

Among those advocating closer engagement was a renowned scholar named Vicāramati, Investigating Mind.

He argued before the Great Council:

"A physician who never approaches the sick cannot heal them.

If we remain forever distant, our understanding will remain incomplete."

An elder nun named Padmāśrī replied:

"Approach, then, as a servant and not as a master.

Approach as a student and not as an owner.

Approach with empty hands and an empty heart."

Many praised her wisdom.

Yet many found Vicāramati's proposal more exciting.

Thus preparations began.

These preparations did not concern engines, machines, or worldly contrivances.

Rather, selected contemplatives undertook prolonged disciplines of meditation intended to cultivate profound empathy with distant beings.

Some aspired that, through the ripening of karma and future rebirth, they might one day dwell among humans.

Others merely sought visionary communion across the vast web of dependent origination.

The Blessed One declared:

"Not all who contemplated descent were moved by domination.

Many sincerely desired mutual learning.

Judge carefully, Sāgaramati, for the heart of each being differs."

Then the vision showed circles of practitioners entering deep samādhi.

During these absorptions they perceived dreams unlike ordinary dreams.

Some witnessed forests unknown in Raktaloka.

Some beheld mountain monasteries.

Some heard chants uttered in unfamiliar tongues.

Others saw villages where compassion flourished amidst poverty.

Upon awakening, they recorded these visions in careful detail.

The records became known as the Crimson Journals.

Younger scholars treated them as maps.

Older sages treated them as opportunities for humility.

The Buddha then spoke in verse:

The traveler who seeks wisdom
Returns with gratitude.

The traveler who seeks conquest
Returns with chains.

Though both walk the same road,
Their destinations differ.

In time there arose a contemplative called Anantadarśin, Boundless Vision.

He entered meditation for seven years without interruption.

When he emerged, his disciples asked:

"What have you seen?"

He answered only:

"I have seen mothers comforting frightened children in a distant realm.

Because of this, I no longer believe greatness belongs to us alone."

Many expected revelations concerning hidden sciences or celestial mysteries.

Instead they received a lesson in ordinary kindness.

Some disciples understood.

Others were disappointed.

The Blessed One smiled.

"The ordinary act performed with bodhicitta surpasses extraordinary powers employed for vanity."

As enthusiasm for the Human Realm increased, certain councils established Houses of Observation.

These institutions preserved dreams, visions, contemplative insights, and reports from wandering sages.

They emphasized accuracy and restraint.

Their founding charter proclaimed:

"Let no observation become an excuse for arrogance.

Let every discovery increase reverence for dependent origination."

For several generations these principles were faithfully observed.

Then ambitious interpreters subtly altered the emphasis.

Instead of asking,

"What may we learn from humanity?"

they increasingly asked,

"What possibilities does humanity present?"

The words were few.

The karmic difference was immense.

Sāgaramati inquired:

"Blessed One, was this the beginning of the Secret Descent?"

The Tathāgata replied:

"It was its mental beginning.

All actions arise first in intention.

Before the foot crosses a threshold, the mind has already crossed it."

Then the Blessed One revealed another vision.

Within the Houses of Observation stood a great mural depicting countless lotuses floating upon an immeasurable sea.

Each lotus represented a world-system.

Golden threads connected every blossom.

At the center of the mural appeared no throne, no ruler, and no supreme empire.

Instead there was only an empty circle.

The oldest inscription beneath it read:

'Interdependence has no center.'

Later generations added another inscription:

'The wise should guide the network.'

Still later, ambitious students interpreted the second inscription to mean:

'We are the wise.'

Thus a painting intended to teach humility became an occasion for conceit.

The Buddha addressed the assembly:

"Such is the subtlety of ignorance.

Even symbols of emptiness may become ornaments of ego."

Then he recited:

One points at the moon.

Another grasps the finger.

One crosses by raft.

Another builds a palace upon it.

So too do teachings differ
Not by words alone,
But by the minds that receive them.

There lived during this era a humble librarian named Candrapāla.

His duty was to preserve the oldest manuscripts without alteration.

Observing gradual revisions by later commentators, he quietly copied the original texts and concealed them within crystal vaults.

His students asked:

"Master, why preserve forgotten writings?"

He answered:

"When memory serves pride, history bends.

When memory serves truth, future generations may yet awaken."

The Blessed One praised Candrapāla before the assembly.

"Many hidden bodhisattvas labor not through miracles but through careful honesty."

At length, certain contemplatives dedicated vast stores of merit with the aspiration:

"May we, when conditions ripen, encounter the Human Realm in whatever manner benefits sentient beings."

Some made this vow sincerely.

Some mixed it with curiosity.

Some mixed it with ambition.

Because karma differs, their future rebirths likewise differed.

Some were indeed reborn among humans and lived obscure lives marked by generosity.

Others attained heavenly realms.

Still others remained within Raktaloka.

None carried an unchanging identity from one existence to another.

Only the stream of causes and conditions continued.

The Blessed One concluded:

"Sāgaramati, later generations embroidered these events with marvelous tales.

Some imagined secret invasions.

Some imagined hidden empires.

Some imagined unbroken identities traversing worlds.

But the Dharma teaches otherwise.

The true Secret Descent is the descent of intention into action.

It is the quiet crossing from humility into conceit, or from conceit into compassion.

Every moment beings descend into delusion or ascend toward awakening according to the direction of their minds.

Remember this well.

The greatest journey between worlds is the journey from ignorance to wisdom."

When these words had been spoken, countless bodhisattvas attained deeper realization of dependent origination.

Many devas scattered celestial flowers.

The nāga kings rejoiced that no realm lay beyond the reach of compassion.

And the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati praised the immeasurable skillful means of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book III — The Coming to Earth

Chapter 20

The Taking of Human Form

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly in Abhirati.

After hearing the account of the Secret Descent, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat and respectfully addressed the World-Honored One:

"Blessed One, beings in later ages have spoken of the Red Nāgas as though they literally concealed themselves beneath human appearances. How should this be understood according to the Dharma? Is awakening compatible with such stories?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, listen carefully.

The ignorant delight in outer forms.

The wise investigate causes and conditions.

Many accounts are told among sentient beings. Some preserve kernels of truth through symbols, while others mistake symbols for ultimate reality.

Therefore understand the meaning and do not cling merely to the image."

The assembly bowed and listened.

Then the Blessed One revealed another vision.

In the latter generations of Raktaloka, many contemplatives who had directed aspirations toward the Human Realm were reborn there according to karma.

Some were born among rulers.

Some among merchants.

Some among farmers.

Some among artisans.

Some entered monastic communities.

Others lived unnoticed among ordinary families.

None retained an eternal identity.

None carried an immutable essence from one body into another.

Rather, karmic tendencies, habits, and aspirations ripened according to dependent origination.

The Buddha declared:

"Just as one lamp lights another without transferring a permanent flame, so continuity exists without an unchanging self."

Among the younger scholars of Raktaloka, however, stories began to circulate.

They spoke poetically of sages who had "put on the garments of humanity."

Originally this phrase meant only that compassionate beings willingly accepted human rebirth.

Later generations interpreted it literally.

Thus metaphor gradually hardened into legend.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, why do beings cling so strongly to appearances?"

The Buddha answered:

"Because appearances are easier to grasp than emptiness.

A visible disguise seems simpler than the subtle workings of karma.

The deluded prefer stories of changing faces to teachings about changing intentions."

Then the Blessed One spoke in verse:

A painted mask
May hide the face.

But only ignorance
Hides the heart.

The wise seek not
The shape of the skin,

But the direction
Of the mind.

The vision broadened.

The assembly beheld sincere practitioners reborn among humans.

Though carrying no memory of Raktaloka, they displayed unusual inclinations.

Some felt drawn to contemplation from childhood.

Some instinctively practiced generosity.

Some possessed remarkable patience.

Others quickly perceived the suffering caused by pride and attachment.

Likewise, there were those whose previous ambitions matured into subtler forms.

They sought prestige.

They accumulated influence.

They desired admiration.

Their circumstances differed from life to life, but the underlying habits continued until transformed by wisdom.

The Blessed One explained:

"This is what some ancient records symbolically described as the Taking of Human Form.

Not an immortal serpent hidden beneath flesh, but karmic tendencies assuming new conditions of existence."

Among the records preserved in the Crystal Kingdoms there survived a famous dialogue.

A disciple asked the elder Śāntisāgara:

"Master, how shall we recognize one reborn from afar?"

The elder replied:

"By neither eyes nor scales.

By conduct.

Observe whether compassion increases in their presence.

Observe whether greed diminishes.

Observe whether truth is spoken even when costly.

These reveal far more than ancestry."

His disciples treasured the answer.

But later storytellers found it insufficiently dramatic.

Thus legends multiplied.

Some imagined secret bloodlines.

Others imagined hidden transformations.

The original ethical teaching was often forgotten.

The Blessed One smiled gently.

"So it is in many worlds.

The symbol remains.

The meaning wanders."

Then the vision showed an ordinary human village.

A child rescued an injured animal despite ridicule.

An old woman forgave one who had stolen from her.

A wandering monk shared his final meal with strangers.

No miracles occurred.

No celestial signs appeared.

Yet Akṣobhya said:

"Behold true transformation.

The taking of human form reaches fulfillment when beings embody compassion rather than merely possessing human bodies."

At that moment many in the assembly entered deep contemplation.

For they perceived that birth alone neither ennobles nor degrades.

Only intention, action, and wisdom shape the path.

Then there arose within the Human Realm certain teachers fascinated by status and mystery.

To increase their own prestige they claimed hidden origins.

Some asserted descent from celestial dynasties.

Others from ancient serpent kings.

Still others from secret orders unknown to ordinary people.

People gathered around them in curiosity.

Yet nearby dwelt a humble nun named Maitrīdevī.

When questioned concerning her lineage, she answered:

"I descend from ignorance.

I aspire toward awakening.

That is enough."

The Blessed One praised her greatly.

He declared:

"Those who boast of extraordinary origins often remain bound by ordinary conceit.

Those who recognize the emptiness of identity approach liberation."

Then the Tathāgata recited:

Not by birth
Does one become noble.

Not by appearance
Does one become wise.

Not by hidden lineage
Does one become pure.

By abandoning greed,
Hatred,
And delusion,

One becomes
A child of the Buddhas.

Sāgaramati then asked:

"Blessed One, if no permanent self travels between worlds, what truly descends?"

The Buddha answered:

"Neither self nor substance descends.

Conditions continue.

Intentions bear fruit.

Habits seek expression.

Compassion ripens into service.

Conceit ripens into further bondage.

Thus dependent origination alone is sufficient to explain continuity.

No eternal traveler need be imagined."

The assembly rejoiced.

Many who had secretly clung to subtle notions of identity released them.

Then Akṣobhya revealed one final vision.

The Human Realm and Raktaloka appeared as two lotuses floating upon the same boundless ocean of causes and conditions.

Between them stretched countless streams of karma.

Some carried beings toward wisdom.

Others toward confusion.

None belonged to any fixed owner.

The waters themselves reflected only emptiness.

The Blessed One concluded:

"Remember this well, Sāgaramati.

The greatest disguise is not a change of body but a change of motivation.

One may wear the robe of a monk while pursuing fame.

One may wear the crown of a ruler while cultivating compassion.

One may appear ordinary while practicing the Bodhisattva Path in secret.

Therefore judge no being by outward form.

See instead whether their actions lessen suffering.

For all forms are impermanent.

All identities are provisional.

Only the realization of Suchness cuts through every mask."

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained deeper insight into non-self.

The devas showered the assembly with celestial blossoms.

The nāga kings rejoiced that even legends could become skillful means when interpreted through the Dharma.

And the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed low before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, praising his immeasurable wisdom.

Book III — The Coming to Earth

Chapter 21

The Teaching of False Kingship

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Taking of Human Form had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose, arranged his robe upon one shoulder, and bowed before the World-Honored One.

He asked:

"Blessed One, if certain streams of consciousness from Raktaloka took birth among humans according to karma, how did some come to teach doctrines of domination rather than compassion? By what causes did the idea of false kingship arise?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, understand well that the gravest tyranny is not exercised by a monarch over a kingdom but by ignorance over the heart.

The teaching of false kingship does not begin with crowns or thrones.

It begins when one imagines:

'Because I possess greater knowledge, others exist for my purposes.'

Listen carefully."

The Blessed One then manifested another vision.

The assembly beheld many regions of the Human Realm across the passing centuries.

Some lands were governed by councils.

Some by kings.

Some by wandering clans.

Some by no enduring authority at all.

In each place there arose wise rulers and foolish rulers, compassionate leaders and cruel leaders.

The Buddha said:

"Political forms vary according to karma and conditions.

None is permanently pure.

None is permanently corrupt.

The decisive matter is whether those entrusted with responsibility cultivate generosity, ethical conduct, patience, and wisdom."

Among those reborn from the karmic streams of Raktaloka were certain gifted teachers.

Many became healers.

Many became contemplatives.

Many quietly served their communities.

Yet a few retained subtle attachments from former lives.

They admired order above freedom.

Control above dialogue.

Certainty above inquiry.

When placed in positions of influence, they reasoned:

"If the people obey without question, suffering will diminish."

Their intentions were mixed.

Some sincerely sought stability.

Others unconsciously sought self-importance.

Thus wholesome aspiration and conceit became intertwined.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, is guidance itself blameworthy?"

The Buddha answered:

"Certainly not.

Parents guide children.

Teachers guide students.

The Buddha guides disciples.

The bodhisattva guides beings.

But guidance rooted in compassion points beyond itself.

Guidance rooted in attachment seeks perpetual dependence.

The first liberates.

The second binds."

Then the Blessed One spoke these verses:

The true shepherd
Leads the flock to pasture
And rejoices when they thrive.

The false shepherd
Weakens the flock
So that it never leaves his side.

Thus also with rulers,
Teachers,
And sages.

Judge not their words alone,
But the freedom they cultivate.

The vision then showed an influential philosopher among humans who gathered many followers.

He taught:

"The world is too dangerous to entrust to ordinary judgment.

Only the enlightened few should determine the path for the many."

His students applauded.

His institutions prospered.

His cities became orderly.

Yet over generations questioning declined.

Independent thought weakened.

Citizens increasingly obeyed from habit rather than understanding.

Nearby lived an elderly gardener named Anukampā, Compassion.

She could neither read nor debate.

When asked about governance she replied:

"A tree grows strongest when tended, not when pulled upward by force."

Travelers laughed at her simplicity.

Yet children who worked in her gardens grew into unusually kind adults.

The Blessed One smiled.

"Hidden wisdom often flowers in unnoticed places."

As time passed, ambitious rulers sought legitimacy from celebrated scholars.

Scholars sought influence through rulers.

Each strengthened the attachment of the other.

The language of service slowly transformed into the language of destiny.

Some proclaimed:

"We alone are fit to direct history."

Others declared:

"The people require permanent guardians."

Thus arose the Doctrine of False Kingship.

It did not claim merely that wise leadership was beneficial.

It asserted that certain beings possessed an inherent right to stand above others.

The Blessed One declared:

"This doctrine contradicts dependent origination.

No being stands independently.

No authority exists apart from conditions.

No office abolishes impermanence.

Even a universal monarch ages, sickens, dies, and is reborn according to karma."

The assembly rejoiced at these words.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, did no one oppose such teachings?"

The Buddha replied:

"There arose many hidden bodhisattvas."

One was a judge called Dharmagupta.

When appointed to high office he refused elaborate ceremonies.

He sat upon the same level as petitioners.

When questioned concerning this custom, he answered:

"If I sit above them physically, pride may persuade me that I stand above them spiritually."

His judgments became renowned for fairness.

Another was a queen named Śrīmatī.

She ordered that each year the royal household spend one month living among laborers and farmers.

When ministers protested, she replied:

"A ruler who forgets ordinary suffering has already ceased ruling justly."

Her kingdom prospered not through fear but through trust.

The Blessed One praised both before the assembly.

Then he recited:

The highest throne
Is empty.

The greatest crown
Is humility.

The surest fortress
Is compassion.

The ruler who knows this
Needs few guards.

The vision changed once more.

The assembly saw certain contemplatives from Raktaloka observing these developments through meditation.

Some grieved.

They recognized echoes of their own civilization's earlier decline.

The elder Candrapāla wrote:

"We sought order and nearly lost wisdom.

May the humans avoid our error."

His manuscript circulated quietly among sincere practitioners.

Yet ambitious minds found little use for it.

For warnings rarely attract those intoxicated by power.

Then the Blessed One addressed Sāgaramati directly.

"Know this distinction well.

There exists righteous stewardship and false kingship.

Righteous stewardship recognizes authority as a temporary responsibility undertaken for the welfare of others.

False kingship mistakes responsibility for possession.

The steward says:

'These beings have been entrusted to my care.'

The false king says:

'These beings belong to me.'

The first plants forests.

The second builds prisons.

The first serves impermanence.

The second wages war against it."

The Bodhisattva bowed deeply.

Then Akṣobhya revealed a final image.

A magnificent throne appeared in empty space.

It was adorned with jewels beyond counting.

One by one kings, philosophers, generals, scholars, merchants, and priests attempted to sit upon it.

Each dissolved into mist before touching the seat.

Finally an unknown mendicant approached.

Instead of sitting, he bowed to the empty throne and walked away to comfort a weeping child.

At once the throne transformed into a blooming lotus.

The Blessed One explained:

"The highest sovereignty is mastery over greed, hatred, and delusion.

The one who conquers self-clinging governs no subjects yet benefits innumerable beings.

This is the kingship praised by the Buddhas."

Then he concluded with these verses:

Rule the tongue
Before ruling a city.

Rule the mind
Before ruling a household.

Rule attachment
Before ruling a nation.

He who conquers himself
Needs no empire.

She who perfects compassion
Already dwells
In the kingdom of the Dharma.

When these words had been spoken, countless bodhisattvas generated deeper resolve never to confuse service with domination.

The devas scattered celestial blossoms.

The nāga kings lowered their jeweled crowns to the sapphire ground.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rejoiced exceedingly, praising the immeasurable wisdom of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book III — The Coming to Earth

Chapter 22

The Founding of Hidden Dynasties

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue the sacred discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in Abhirati.

After hearing the teaching concerning False Kingship, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his seat, bowed with joined palms, and respectfully asked:

"World-Honored One, later traditions among many peoples speak of secret lineages and hidden rulers who guide events from behind visible institutions. How should such accounts be understood in accordance with the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, many tales arise in worlds where causes are difficult to perceive.

When beings cannot discern dependent origination, they often imagine invisible puppeteers.

Sometimes there are indeed hidden influences, but these are usually habits, ideas, customs, and karmic tendencies passed

from generation to generation—not immutable bloodlines nor eternal conspirators.

Listen carefully."

The assembly became still.

Then the Blessed One revealed another vision.

The Human Realm appeared in many ages and many lands.

Kingdoms rose and fell.

Cities were founded and abandoned.

Languages changed.

Empires dissolved like foam upon the sea.

Yet certain teachings, institutions, and ambitions endured far longer than individual rulers.

The Buddha said:

"What is inherited most deeply is not flesh but intention.

Not ancestry but habit.

Not blood but karma."

Among those influenced by the lingering conceits of Raktaloka there arose schools of governance dedicated to preserving their own authority across generations.

Their founders reasoned:

"If wisdom is to endure, institutions must endure.

If institutions are to endure, succession must be carefully managed."

At first these intentions contained genuine prudence.

Teachers trained worthy students.

Judges mentored apprentices.

Monastics instructed novices.

Parents educated children.

Such transmission accorded with the Dharma.

But gradually attachment entered.

Certain families concluded:

"Our descendants alone should preserve these responsibilities."

Certain councils proclaimed:

"Our customs alone guarantee stability."

Certain scholars insisted:

"Our interpretation alone safeguards civilization."

Thus stewardship slowly hardened into exclusivity.

The Blessed One declared:

"The desire to preserve wisdom is wholesome.

The desire to monopolize wisdom is not."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, is continuity itself contrary to the Path?"

The Buddha answered:

"Certainly not.

The Dharma is transmitted from teacher to disciple.

Monastic lineages preserve discipline.

Families hand down virtues.

The error lies not in continuity but in attachment.

The bodhisattva transmits the lamp while knowing that the flame belongs to none."

Then the Blessed One recited:

One candle lights another.

Neither says,
'I own the fire.'

One teacher guides another.

Neither says,
'I own the truth.'

Thus the Dharma passes on,
Without possession.

The vision then revealed several influential houses that quietly accumulated prestige over many generations.

They married among respected families.

They educated their children diligently.

They cultivated scholarship and public service.

Many among them sincerely benefited society.

Yet a subtle belief took root:

"We have been chosen by history."

This thought produced invisible walls.

Outsiders found advancement increasingly difficult.

Fresh perspectives were dismissed.

Merit slowly yielded to inherited privilege.

Still, these developments remained hidden beneath appearances of respectability.

No proclamation announced superiority.

It simply became assumed.

The Blessed One said:

"Sāgaramati, attachment rarely declares itself openly.

It whispers.

It settles.

It becomes custom.

Then custom masquerades as necessity."

At that time there lived a wandering monk named Sumedha.

He carried no possessions except his robe and bowl.

When invited into noble houses, he accepted hospitality.

When invited into humble cottages, he accepted equally.

Asked whether he preferred one over the other, he replied:

"The rain nourishes palace gardens and roadside weeds without discrimination.

Should a disciple of the Buddha aspire to less?"

His saying spread throughout many provinces.

Some noble families welcomed it.

Others quietly ignored it.

Meanwhile certain institutions began preserving their internal deliberations in secret.

Originally this practice protected vulnerable communities during times of unrest.

Sensitive discussions concerning defense, diplomacy, or relief efforts required discretion.

Such confidentiality was often appropriate.

Yet later generations confused temporary secrecy with permanent opacity.

Meetings became inaccessible.

Records disappeared.

Questioning was discouraged.

Eventually mystery itself became a source of prestige.

The Blessed One explained:

"There is a difference between guarding confidence and cultivating obscurity.

The physician keeps a patient's suffering private out of compassion.

The deceiver hides actions to avoid accountability.

The outward concealment may appear similar.

The intention differs."

The assembly reflected deeply.

Then the Buddha manifested another vision.

A magnificent library stood beneath a crystal dome.

Its oldest chambers welcomed every sincere student.

Its newest chambers admitted only a select few.

No law required exclusion.

The keepers simply assumed that ordinary minds could not understand.

As generations passed, the excluded ceased attempting entry.

The custodians ceased noticing the loss.

Knowledge narrowed.

Humility faded.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, did no one challenge these hidden circles?"

The Tathāgata replied:

"There arose a librarian named Prakāśamati, Mind of Illumination.

Every evening, after the official scholars departed, he quietly welcomed laborers, travelers, and children into neglected reading halls.

He taught them letters.

He explained philosophy patiently.

When criticized, he answered:

'If wisdom fears questions, it has already ceased being wisdom.'"

Many future teachers emerged from those humble gatherings.

The Blessed One praised him before the assembly.

Then he recited:

The locked gate
Protects treasure.

But if never opened,
The treasure serves no one.

Knowledge hidden forever
Becomes another form
Of poverty.

As centuries passed, legends exaggerated these developments.

Stories spoke of hidden dynasties directing kingdoms from unseen chambers.

Some imagined immortal rulers.

Others imagined unbroken secret bloodlines stretching across millennia.

The Blessed One smiled compassionately.

"Beings delight in marvelous stories.

Yet the more pervasive dynasty is subtler.

It is the dynasty of craving.

One generation teaches attachment to the next.

Conceit instructs conceit.

Fear educates fear.

Thus ignorance reproduces itself without need of immortal kings."

The assembly marveled at this teaching.

Then Akṣobhya revealed a symbolic vision.

They saw an immense palace with no visible occupants.

Yet servants continued sweeping floors.

Messengers continued delivering decrees.

Officials continued enforcing regulations.

Finally a child entered and asked,

"Who lives here?"

Silence answered.

The palace gradually dissolved into mist.

The Blessed One explained:

"Many institutions continue through habit long after their original purpose has faded.

The wise periodically ask whether the structure still serves compassion.

The unwise preserve it merely because it exists."

Sāgaramati bowed and said:

"World-Honored One, what then is the proper inheritance?"

The Buddha replied:

"Not privilege but responsibility.

Not secrecy but discernment.

Not lineage but virtue.

Not hidden dynasties but open generosity.

Transmit precepts.

Transmit compassion.

Transmit wisdom.

These are the only treasures that increase by being shared."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Leave not your children
Only wealth.

Leave them integrity.

Leave not your disciples
Only methods.

Leave them humility.

Leave not the future
Only institutions.

Leave it compassion,
For compassion alone
Transforms inheritance
Into merit.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas deepened their understanding of karma as the true inheritance passed through the ages.

The devas scattered celestial blossoms throughout Abhirati.

The nāga kings renewed vows to transmit wisdom without attachment.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rejoiced exceedingly and praised the immeasurable teaching of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book III — The Coming to Earth

Chapter 23

The Whispering in Dreams

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Founding of Hidden Dynasties had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, bowed with joined palms, and respectfully asked:

"World-Honored One, many beings in the Human Realm report dreams that alter the course of their lives. Some dreams encourage virtue, while others inflame greed, fear, or delusion. How should such visions be understood according to the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, dreams arise from many causes.

Some arise from bodily conditions.

Some from memories.

Some from hopes and fears.

Some from karmic impressions carried in the stream of consciousness.

Some become occasions for devas, bodhisattvas, or compassionate teachers to encourage wholesome aspirations.

Others merely reflect the turbulence of an untamed mind.

Therefore the wise neither cling to dreams nor despise them, but examine their fruits."

The assembly listened attentively.

Then the Blessed One manifested another vision.

The Human Realm appeared beneath the quiet light of night.

Countless beings slept.

Kings and laborers.

Monastics and merchants.

Children and elders.

Each entered dreams according to causes and conditions unique to them.

Some dreamed of reunion with lost loved ones.

Some dreamed of wealth.

Some dreamed of danger.

Some dreamed of awakening.

The Buddha declared:

"The dream itself is not the teacher.

The awakened discernment brought to the dream determines its value."

In those days, among the contemplatives of Raktaloka who continued observing the Human Realm through profound meditation, there arose a compassionate elder named Dharmasena.

Perceiving that many humans struggled to cultivate kindness amid hardship, he dedicated the merit of his meditation with this aspiration:

"May fearful minds discover courage.

May grieving minds discover hope.

May all who dream awaken with greater compassion than before."

He did not seek recognition.

He did not imagine himself directing another's destiny.

He merely offered wholesome intention into the vast network of dependent origination.

Some humans, awakening from unusually peaceful dreams, found themselves reconciled with estranged friends.

Others forgave old injuries.

Still others resolved to undertake ethical conduct.

Dharmasena claimed no credit.

He bowed instead toward the Dharma.

The Blessed One smiled.

"This accords with the conduct of a bodhisattva.

The bodhisattva plants seeds but does not demand ownership of the harvest."

Then there arose another circle of practitioners whose intentions were less pure.

Observing that emotional states influenced future conduct, they began asking:

"If inspiration may travel subtly through the mind, could ambition also be encouraged?

If courage may be strengthened, could attachment likewise be strengthened?"

Their questions revealed the lingering conceit inherited from earlier generations.

An elder nun named Padmāśrī admonished them:

"Do not mistake another being's sleeping mind for unguarded territory.

Even dreams deserve reverence."

Some listened.

Others quietly continued their investigations.

The Blessed One then recited:

To enter another's sorrow
With compassion
Is merit.

To seek advantage
From another's confusion
Is bondage.

The sleeping child
Entrusts the night
To kindness.

Let no one
Betray that trust.

The vision broadened.

The assembly beheld ordinary humans awakening after vivid dreams.

A farmer who dreamed of sharing grain became more generous.

A physician who dreamed of standing beside the sick redoubled her service.

A young ruler who dreamed that his palace had dissolved into dust abandoned needless luxury and devoted resources to public welfare.

The dreams themselves varied greatly.

What united them was the wholesome transformation that followed.

The Blessed One explained:

"Judge no vision by its splendor.

Judge it by the compassion it leaves behind."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, can dreams deceive?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"They can.

The dreaming mind readily mistakes craving for prophecy and fear for certainty.

Therefore every dream should be tested against the Dharma.

If it encourages greed, abandon it.

If it nourishes hatred, abandon it.

If it inflames conceit, abandon it.

If it deepens generosity, patience, wisdom, or compassion, treasure the wholesome intention while releasing attachment to the imagery."

At that time there lived in the Human Realm an elderly monk called Somaprabha.

Many sought his interpretation of dreams.

His answers were invariably brief.

To one who dreamed of becoming a great king he said:

"Rule your anger."

To one who dreamed of discovering hidden treasure he said:

"Practice generosity."

To one who dreamed of conquering enemies he said:

"Conquer resentment."

When asked why he ignored the obvious symbols, he replied:

"The Dharma speaks more clearly than dreams."

His reputation spread not because he foretold events but because those who followed his counsel became kinder.

The Blessed One praised him before the assembly.

Then another vision appeared.

The contemplatives of Raktaloka gathered annually beneath crystal domes to discuss reports concerning dreams observed in the Human Realm.

Some approached the subject with humility.

They marveled that simple people often discovered profound truths while asleep.

Others became fascinated by the possibility of shaping aspirations through subtle suggestion.

One ambitious scholar proposed:

"If wholesome images inspire virtue, carefully arranged images might inspire orderly conduct throughout entire populations."

Dharmasena immediately objected.

He stood before the council and declared:

"The task of the compassionate is to awaken discernment, not replace it.

A being who acts kindly because wisdom has arisen accumulates merit.

A being maneuvered into appearances of virtue without understanding remains vulnerable to future delusion."

Many applauded his speech.

Some ignored it.

The old conflict between humility and control persisted.

The Blessed One addressed Sāgaramati:

"Remember this distinction well.

The Buddha teaches openly and invites examination.

Māra whispers secretly and discourages inquiry.

The Dharma flourishes in clarity.

Delusion prefers obscurity."

Then the Blessed One recited:

The clear bell
Needs no hidden chamber.

The bright lamp
Needs no secret cave.

Truth fears no questions.

Only falsehood
Requires darkness.

Finally, Akṣobhya manifested one last symbolic vision.

The assembly saw countless sleeping beings scattered across innumerable worlds.

Above each rested a lotus bud.

Whenever the sleeper awakened with greater compassion than before, the lotus opened slightly.

Whenever the sleeper awakened clinging more tightly to greed or fear, the petals closed again.

No external power forced them.

Each responded to intention.

The Buddha explained:

"So too does karma unfold.

The subtlest whisper is not heard through the ear but through one's own repeated habits.

Greed whispers.

Fear whispers.

Pride whispers.

Compassion also whispers.

Attend carefully to that inner voice which leads toward the welfare of all beings.

This is the whisper nearest to the Dharma."

Then the Blessed One concluded:

"Sāgaramati, later storytellers imagined secret masters ruling the world through dreams.

Yet the deeper truth is both simpler and more profound.

Every night beings encounter the echoes of their own conditioning.

Every morning they receive another opportunity to cultivate wisdom.

The greatest influence upon the dream is the mind that dreams it.

The greatest awakening occurs when one carries mindfulness from sleep into waking life."

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated deeper understanding of karmic continuity and the discipline of mindfulness.

The devas scattered celestial blossoms throughout Abhirati.

The nāga kings praised the clarity of the Dharma.

And the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rejoiced exceedingly in the immeasurable wisdom of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book III — The Coming to Earth

Chapter 24

The Construction of the Invisible Empire

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly gathered in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Whispering in Dreams had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, adjusted his robe, and bowed before the Blessed One.

He asked:

"World-Honored One, among later generations there arose tales of an invisible empire governing the affairs of beings from behind appearances. How should such stories be understood through the Dharma? Does there truly exist such an empire?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, there is indeed an invisible empire.

But it is not built of hidden palaces, secret armies, or immortal rulers.

Its foundations are ignorance.

Its ministers are craving and aversion.

Its laws are habit.

Its taxes are suffering.

Its borders extend wherever beings mistake the conditioned for the permanent.

Listen carefully."

The assembly became utterly silent.

Even the jeweled streams of Abhirati seemed to pause in their flowing.

Then the Blessed One manifested another vision.

The assembly beheld countless human kingdoms spread across mountains, forests, deserts, islands, and plains.

Each possessed different customs.

Each spoke different languages.

Each organized society in different ways.

Some flourished.

Some declined.

Some disappeared without leaving monuments.

Yet through all these changes certain invisible patterns persisted.

People desired praise.

They feared blame.

They sought security.

They defended identities.

They clung to possessions.

The Buddha said:

"Behold the true empire.

It requires no throne.

It exists wherever attachment governs perception."

Among the contemplatives influenced by the lingering conceits of Raktaloka there arose scholars who believed lasting influence depended less upon armies than upon habits.

One wrote:

"If customs endure, kingdoms may vanish without altering the course of society."

Another observed:

"If assumptions remain unquestioned, no decree need compel obedience."

Originally these insights encouraged careful education and ethical formation.

Teachers sought to establish habits of generosity.

Parents taught patience.

Monastics cultivated mindfulness.

These were wholesome uses of understanding.

But as attachment deepened, some reversed the purpose.

Instead of asking how habits might free beings from suffering, they asked how habits might preserve institutions.

Thus subtle manipulation replaced compassionate formation.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, by what sign may one distinguish wholesome guidance from invisible domination?"

The Tathāgata replied:

"Observe the fruit.

Wholesome guidance gradually renders itself unnecessary, for it cultivates discernment.

Invisible domination creates dependence and fears
independent wisdom.

The first rejoices when students surpass teachers.

The second fears such surpassing."

Then the Blessed One recited:

The good physician
Delights when health returns.

The false physician
Requires endless illness.

The true teacher
Celebrates the free mind.

The false teacher
Collects obedient shadows.

The vision broadened.

The assembly saw generations of humans inheriting customs
whose origins they no longer remembered.

Some traditions encouraged hospitality.

Some preserved justice.

Some restrained violence.

Others perpetuated prejudice.

Still others rewarded vanity.

Very few questioned how these habits arose.

They simply accepted them.

The Blessed One explained:

"Karma often appears not only in individuals but in communities.

Collective habits shape collective experience.

Yet even the oldest habit remains impermanent."

There lived during this era a humble village potter named Satyaketu.

Each year he intentionally altered one small design upon the ceremonial bowls he crafted.

When asked why he never repeated the exact pattern of his ancestors, he replied:

"If tradition cannot welcome wisdom, it hardens into attachment.

If change forgets gratitude, it hardens into arrogance.

Therefore I preserve the spirit while examining the form."

His village prospered through moderation.

The Blessed One praised him greatly.

Then the vision shifted to a magnificent metropolis where officials meticulously regulated public ceremonies.

The forms were elegant.

The processions orderly.

The records immaculate.

Yet many participants no longer remembered why the rituals existed.

They observed them mechanically.

When questioned concerning their meaning, one official answered:

"We continue because they have always been continued."

The Buddha turned toward Sāgaramati.

"This is another invisible empire.

Habit ruling without understanding."

Then he spoke in verse:

A wheel continues turning
After the hand departs.

A bell continues ringing
After it is struck.

So too does ignorance
Echo through generations

Until mindfulness
Listens carefully.

At that time there appeared a wandering nun called Vimuktā, the Freed One.

She traveled without possessions except her robe, bowl, and staff.

Wherever she found communities burdened by needless customs, she asked a single question:

"Does this practice reduce suffering?"

If the answer was yes, she encouraged it.

If no one could answer, she gently invited reconsideration.

Many communities rediscovered forgotten purposes through her inquiries.

Others abandoned empty formalities.

Still others rejected her as disruptive.

She accepted praise and blame equally.

The Blessed One declared:

"Thus the bodhisattva undermines invisible empires not through violence but through wisdom."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, why do beings construct such unseen dominions?"

The Buddha answered:

"Because certainty appears comforting.

An unquestioned custom relieves the burden of reflection.

An inherited prejudice relieves the burden of investigation.

An established hierarchy relieves the burden of humility.

But comfort purchased through ignorance increases future suffering."

The vision now revealed symbolic imagery.

The assembly saw an immense city built entirely from transparent crystal.

No walls enclosed it.

No guards patrolled it.

Yet every inhabitant walked the same narrow paths.

Above the city floated invisible threads attached not to their bodies but to their thoughts.

Whenever one questioned an inherited assumption with mindfulness and compassion, a thread dissolved.

Whenever one clung to conceit or fear, another thread appeared.

At last a child entered the city and simply asked:

"Must we walk only here?"

Upon hearing the question, entire streets vanished, revealing open meadows beyond.

The Blessed One smiled.

"The strongest prison is often the one whose gates have never been tested."

The assembly rejoiced.

Many bodhisattvas entered profound contemplation.

Then Akṣobhya addressed Sāgaramati directly:

"Later generations imagined hidden empires ruled by secret councils.

Yet the more pervasive empire is subtler.

It is the accumulated momentum of greed, hatred, and delusion operating through countless ordinary actions.

No conspiracy equals the power of collective ignorance.

Likewise, no revolution surpasses the quiet awakening of even a single mind."

The Bodhisattva bowed deeply.

The Blessed One concluded with these verses:

No tyrant rules
Longer than craving.

No fortress stands
Stronger than delusion.

No invisible empire
Endures forever.

For one moment
Of genuine insight

Breaks chains
Forged over centuries.

Therefore cultivate
Mirror-like wisdom.

See conditions
As conditions.

See habits
As habits.

See emptiness
Within appearances.

Then every unseen kingdom
Collapses into Suchness.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas realized profound insight into dependent origination and the emptiness of social constructs.

The devas scattered celestial flowers like rain.

The nāga kings praised the liberation that comes through discernment.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rejoiced with the entire assembly, extolling the immeasurable wisdom and compassion of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book IV — The Harvest of Fear

Chapter 25

The Discovery of Emotional Energies

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Construction of the Invisible Empire had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his seat, bowed respectfully, and addressed the Blessed One:

"World-Honored One, many later traditions speak of invisible forces generated by emotion, as though fear, anger, or compassion possessed power beyond the individual. How should such claims be understood within the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, emotions are conditioned mental formations. They arise dependent upon causes, abide briefly, and cease when their supporting conditions cease. They are not substances to be stored in vessels, nor fluids to be harvested, nor treasures to be possessed.

Yet they are not insignificant.

A single moment of anger may influence many beings.

A single act of compassion may inspire generations.

Thus the movements of mind condition the world."

The assembly rejoiced in this clarification.

Then the Blessed One manifested another vision.

The sages of declining Raktaloka and the observers of the Human Realm continued their investigations into consciousness.

Having studied dreams, memory, attention, and social habits, they now turned to collective emotions.

Gathering in the Crystal Halls, they observed cities during festivals and during disasters.

They noticed remarkable patterns.

When panic spread, judgment narrowed.

When hatred spread, communities fragmented.

When gratitude spread, generosity multiplied.

When courage spread, despair diminished.

One elder wrote upon a crystal tablet:

"The mind of each being is not isolated.

Like lamps illuminating one another, wholesome and unwholesome states condition neighboring minds."

The Blessed One declared:

"This observation was sound.

It accords with dependent origination."

But among younger scholars another interpretation arose.

They exclaimed:

"If emotions shape societies, then emotions themselves become resources!

Perhaps entire civilizations may be directed by cultivating specific feelings."

The elder who had authored the tablet immediately objected.

He struck the crystal floor with his staff and proclaimed:

"No!

Compassion is to be shared, not exploited.

Fear is to be calmed, not preserved.

Understanding is to free beings, not bind them."

His warning was recorded.

Few remembered it.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, did these investigators discover some hidden force?"

The Buddha answered:

"They discovered interdependence but misunderstood ownership.

They perceived that minds influence one another and imagined that influence could be possessed.

This was their error."

Then the Blessed One spoke these verses:

The fragrance of incense
Fills many rooms.

Yet no one owns
Its perfume.

So too kindness
Spreads beyond itself.

Yet belongs
To no one.

Claim not possession
Over what arises
Only through conditions.

The vision expanded.

The assembly saw a great city struck by earthquake.

Panic seized the inhabitants.

But amid the confusion a single elderly monk sat calmly in the public square, breathing mindfully.

Seeing his tranquility, frightened children approached him.

Their parents followed.

Soon the crowd itself grew calmer.

No command had been issued.

No force had been applied.

Only one settled mind had conditioned many others.

Nearby, another observer wrote:

"Peace also propagates."

This observation should have inspired universal cultivation of mindfulness.

Instead some ambitious scholars concluded:

"If calm influences crowds, then terror must likewise influence crowds.

Therefore emotion itself becomes a tool."

The Blessed One shook his head gently.

"Sāgaramati, they mistook medicine for poison and poison for medicine.

The same knowledge may liberate or enslave depending upon intention."

Then there lived a compassionate healer named Karuṇamati.

She traveled from village to village tending not only broken bodies but distressed minds.

Her method was simple.

She listened patiently.

She encouraged truthfulness.

She taught breathing meditation.

She invited estranged families to eat together.

Her fame spread because conflict lessened wherever she stayed.

When asked the source of her remarkable influence, she answered:

"I merely stop adding fear to fear."

The Buddha praised her conduct.

Then he recited:

When one lamp is lit,
Darkness retreats.

When one heart is calmed,
Many hearts may follow.

Therefore seek not
To master emotions,

But to purify
Your own.

Meanwhile, in another region, certain administrators became fascinated with statistics concerning public feeling.

They measured unrest.

They counted grievances.

They recorded enthusiasm.

Such observations were often beneficial.

They improved disaster relief and resolved disputes more quickly.

Yet gradually some forgot that numbers represented living beings.

Charts replaced conversations.

Predictions replaced listening.

One official proudly declared:

"We understand the population."

An old village woman overheard him and laughed.

She replied:

"You understand your records.

Have you shared tea with the widows?"

Her words embarrassed him.

Years later he abandoned his post and entered contemplative life.

The Blessed One smiled.

"Thus wisdom sometimes arrives through unexpected mouths."

The vision then revealed symbolic imagery.

The assembly saw an immense lake fed by countless streams.

Each stream represented the emotional lives of sentient beings.

Whenever greed entered a mind, the water became cloudy nearby.

Whenever compassion arose, clarity spread.

No being controlled the lake.

Each contributed to it.

The Buddha explained:

"So too collective karma functions.

Every intention conditions the whole.

Therefore never believe your conduct insignificant."

Sāgaramati bowed deeply.

He asked:

"World-Honored One, what then is the proper response upon discovering that minds influence one another?"

The Blessed One answered:

"Greater responsibility.

Not greater ambition.

When the bodhisattva realizes that every word echoes through dependent origination, speech becomes gentler.

When the bodhisattva realizes that every action inspires imitation, conduct becomes more careful.

Knowledge enlarges compassion.

Only ignorance enlarges domination."

Then Akṣobhya revealed one final parable.

A musician entered a valley carrying a finely crafted lute.

He plucked one string.

The surrounding cliffs echoed the note many times.

His disciple exclaimed:

"Master, you command the mountains!"

The musician laughed.

"I command nothing.

I merely sounded one note.

Conditions produced the echoes."

The Blessed One explained:

"So too with the influence of mind.

The wise do not claim ownership over resonance.

They simply cultivate wholesome causes."

Finally, the Tathāgata addressed the assembly:

"Sāgaramati, later generations embroidered these discoveries into myths of invisible energies gathered and consumed by hidden beings.

But understand the Dharma correctly.

Fear, anger, joy, grief, and compassion are conditioned mental formations.

They leave karmic traces.

They shape communities.

They influence relationships.

Yet they are empty of independent essence.

The greatest energy in the universe is not fear but bodhicitta—the awakened aspiration for the liberation of all beings.

This inexhaustible treasury increases the more freely it is given away."

Then he concluded with these verses:

Harvest not fear.

Harvest wisdom.

Store not terror.

Store generosity.

Accumulate not domination.

Accumulate merit.

For the treasury
Of the bodhisattva

Grows fuller
By being emptied
Into the suffering world.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated immeasurable compassion.

The devas showered celestial blossoms upon the assembly.

The nāga kings renewed vows never to manipulate the emotions of beings for selfish ends.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rejoiced greatly, and all present praised the profound and liberating Dharma proclaimed by Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book IV — The Harvest of Fear

Chapter 26

The Feeding Upon Terror

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly gathered in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Discovery of Emotional Energies had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, bowed with palms joined, and addressed the World-Honored One:

"Blessed One, many later legends claim that certain beings sustain themselves by feeding upon the fear of others. How should this be understood according to the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, no being nourishes its true nature by consuming another's terror.

The Buddha-Nature of beings is not sustained by suffering but revealed when suffering ceases.

Yet there are those who become dependent upon conditions created by fear.

They derive wealth from it.

They derive status from it.

They derive influence from it.

They derive a false sense of identity from it.

In this way, they may be spoken of metaphorically as feeding upon terror.

Listen carefully."

The assembly became silent.

Then the Blessed One manifested another vision.

The Crystal Kingdoms of Raktaloka had long since departed from their highest aspirations.

The Human Realm, too, contained many societies shaped by cycles of anxiety and conflict.

Within both worlds there arose institutions whose prominence increased whenever fear increased.

Some merchants prospered by exaggerating danger.

Some officials expanded authority during times of panic.

Some teachers gained followers by proclaiming endless catastrophe.

Some ascetics attracted disciples through threats rather than wisdom.

Not all acted maliciously.

Many sincerely believed they protected others.

Yet they gradually became attached to the conditions that elevated them.

The Blessed One declared:

"When livelihood depends upon fear, the temptation to preserve fear becomes exceedingly subtle."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, do such persons intentionally create suffering?"

The Buddha answered:

"Some do.

Many do not.

Often attachment itself clouds discernment.

One begins by responding to danger.

One later exaggerates danger.

Eventually one cannot imagine life without danger.

Thus one unconsciously resists peace."

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

The physician
Who rejoices at disease
Has forgotten healing.

The watchman
Who longs for invasion
Has forgotten protection.

The preacher
Who depends on panic
Has forgotten compassion.

Thus craving
Disguises itself
As duty.

The vision broadened.

The assembly beheld a city troubled by recurring rumors of invasion.

Each rumor drew crowds to public squares.

Merchants sold supplies.

Officials demanded extraordinary powers.

Orators gained acclaim through stirring speeches.

When the rumor proved false, few reflected upon the causes.

Instead they prepared for the next alarm.

Over many years, entire professions unconsciously adapted themselves to continual crisis.

Peace became economically inconvenient.

The Buddha explained:

"This is one way beings feed upon terror.

Not by consuming an invisible substance, but by organizing their lives around the continuation of fear."

Nearby lived a humble baker named Dharmamitra.

Whenever panic spread, he quietly distributed bread without charge.

Asked why he gave away his livelihood during emergencies, he answered:

"Hungry people require food more than prices.

Fearful people require neighbors more than speeches."

Though forgotten by historians, his example transformed countless lives.

The Blessed One praised him before the assembly.

Then another vision appeared.

Certain scholars from traditions influenced by the decline of Raktaloka studied emotional contagion.

Some concluded:

"If frightened populations become easier to predict, perhaps stability requires maintaining moderate levels of anxiety."

An elder monk named Vimala immediately objected.

He stood before the council and declared:

"Tranquility strengthens discernment.

Fear weakens discernment.

If you desire wisdom among the people, cultivate courage rather than alarm."

His words received respectful applause.

Yet policy changed little.

The attraction of fear had become habitual.

The Blessed One then recited:

One who drinks salt water
Becomes more thirsty.

One who clings to fear
Requires greater fear.

Only the cool rain
Of wisdom and compassion
Quenches the drought
Of craving.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati reflected deeply.

He asked:

"World-Honored One, if beings become dependent upon fear, can they be liberated?"

The Buddha answered:

"Certainly.

What is conditioned may be transformed.

The one accustomed to panic may cultivate mindfulness.

The one attached to authority may practice humility.

The one who profits from conflict may embrace generosity.

No habit is eternal.

No karma is beyond purification."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then the Blessed One manifested a symbolic vision.

An immense banyan tree spread its branches over a city.

Its roots did not descend into earth but into clouds of smoke rising from quarrels, suspicion, resentment, and anxiety.

As long as people argued endlessly and imagined enemies everywhere, the tree flourished.

But whenever neighbors reconciled, whenever forgiveness replaced revenge, or whenever meditation calmed fearful minds, the smoke diminished.

Its roots weakened.

Its leaves fell.

At last the entire tree dissolved into empty space.

The Buddha explained:

"The tree symbolizes systems sustained by collective delusion.

They appear mighty, yet depend entirely upon the continuation of ignorance.

When wisdom increases, their nourishment disappears."

Then there appeared a novice named Candraprabha.

Observing the vision, he exclaimed:

"So the enemy is the tree!"

The Blessed One gently corrected him.

"No.

The enemy is not the tree.

Nor the people beneath it.

Nor those who unknowingly water its roots.

The enemy is ignorance.

Destroy ignorance through wisdom, and the tree fades without violence."

The novice bowed in gratitude.

At that time there also lived among humans a widow named Śāntidevī whose village had endured repeated seasons of fear.

Bandits, drought, and disease had left the people suspicious of one another.

Instead of spreading further alarm, she organized evenings where neighbors shared stories, meals, and silent meditation.

Gradually trust returned.

Disputes diminished.

The young again played freely.

Travelers remarked that the village seemed brighter though no wealth had increased.

The Blessed One praised her:

"She fed upon neither fear nor praise.

She nourished confidence.

Therefore her merit became immeasurable."

Then Akṣobhya addressed the entire assembly:

"Sāgaramati, understand the deepest meaning.

Some later myths spoke as though hidden beings literally consumed terror as nourishment.

The Dharma reveals a subtler truth.

Whoever builds identity upon fear feeds upon fear.

Whoever bases influence upon panic feeds upon panic.

Whoever secures livelihood by perpetuating anxiety feeds upon panic.

Likewise, whoever delights in compassion feeds upon compassion.

Whoever delights in generosity feeds upon generosity.

Every being becomes shaped by what it habitually cultivates."

The Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Feed not
Upon another's trembling.

Feed upon patience.

Drink not
From the cup of panic.

Drink from mindfulness.

Store not
The harvest of terror.

Store loving-kindness.

For the bodhisattva
Lives upon generosity,
Breathes compassion,
And is sustained
By the inexhaustible Dharma.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas abandoned even the subtlest attachment to influence gained through fear.

The devas scattered celestial blossoms over Abhirati.

The nāga kings vowed to calm frightened beings wherever they might be reborn.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati and the entire assembly rejoiced greatly, praising the profound and liberating wisdom of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book IV — The Harvest of Fear

Chapter 27

The Manipulation of Conflict

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue the sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly gathered in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Feeding Upon Terror had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, bowed respectfully before the Tathāgata, and inquired:

"World-Honored One, if fear can condition the conduct of beings, can conflict itself also become an object of attachment? How did certain peoples come to preserve discord rather than seek reconciliation?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, listen well.

Conflict arises from ignorance, craving, and aversion.

No one is born desiring misery.

Yet when delusion matures, beings may mistake the fruits of conflict for the causes of prosperity.

Thus they preserve the illness while believing they protect the patient."

The assembly became silent.

Then the Blessed One extended a ray of sapphire light, and within it appeared a vision of the Human Realm and the declining civilization of Raktaloka.

In every age there were disagreements.

Families quarreled.

Villages disputed boundaries.

Merchants bargained fiercely.

Scholars debated doctrine.

Such differences were natural manifestations of conditioned existence.

The Buddha said:

"Diversity of opinion is not itself suffering.

Attachment to opinion is the beginning of suffering."

At first the wise among the Red Nāgas sought methods of reconciliation.

Councils invited both sides to speak.

Mediators listened before advising.

Communities shared meals after disputes.

Public ceremonies ended with mutual bows.

For many years these customs prevented violence.

But as pride deepened, another mentality emerged.

Certain advisers observed:

"When disputes continue, our offices become indispensable."

Certain merchants discovered:

"When rival cities distrust one another, our services become more profitable."

Certain orators realized:

"When crowds are angry, they gather eagerly to hear speeches."

None openly wished for bloodshed.

Yet unconsciously they began depending upon continued disagreement.

The Blessed One declared:

"This is how beings become entangled in the manipulation of conflict.

They cease seeing peace as beneficial because unrest has become advantageous to them."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, did they intentionally create enemies?"

The Buddha answered:

"Sometimes.

More often they merely exaggerated differences.

Minor disagreements became profound divisions.

Temporary mistakes became permanent identities.

Rumors replaced investigation.

Assumptions replaced dialogue.

Thus imaginary walls acquired the appearance of stone."

The Blessed One then recited:

A spark ignored
May kindle a forest.

A rumor repeated
May divide a nation.

A patient word
May extinguish both.

Therefore guard speech
As carefully
As treasure.

The vision shifted.

Two neighboring towns shared a single river.

For generations they celebrated festivals together.

One season a disagreement arose concerning irrigation.

The matter could easily have been resolved.

Instead ambitious officials on both sides declared:

"They disrespect our traditions."

"They threaten our future."

"They have always envied us."

Within months neighbors became strangers.

Within years children inherited resentments whose origins they no longer understood.

The river continued flowing peacefully between them.

Only the minds of beings had changed.

The Buddha turned toward the assembly.

"The water did not divide itself.

The people divided themselves."

At that time there lived a wandering nun named Kṣāntimatī, Rich in Patience.

Upon arriving in the troubled region she refused invitations to address either faction separately.

Instead she stood upon the bridge crossing the river and silently swept it each morning.

Curious villagers gathered.

Finally someone asked,

"Whose side are you on?"

She replied,

"The side that crosses."

Many laughed.

Yet over time merchants resumed travel across the bridge.

Children followed.

Conversations resumed.

The dispute slowly diminished.

The Blessed One praised her conduct.

Then he spoke in verse:

Build one bridge,
And a thousand suspicions weaken.

Build one wall,
And a thousand suspicions grow.

The bodhisattva
Carries stones
Only for bridges.

Meanwhile among certain scholars influenced by the decline of Raktaloka arose elaborate theories of social management.

Some argued:

"Moderate rivalry encourages innovation."

This observation contained partial truth.

Friendly competition sometimes sharpened skill.

But ambitious interpreters extended the idea.

"If limited rivalry is beneficial, perhaps controlled conflict strengthens civilization."

They therefore cultivated factions.

Symbols distinguished groups.

Ceremonies emphasized differences.

Public debates rewarded victory more than understanding.

For a time participation increased.

Enthusiasm flourished.

Yet gradually mutual respect withered.

Identity hardened.

Cooperation declined.

The elder Dharmasena lamented:

"They have mistaken sharpening the blade for cutting the body."

Few understood him.

The Blessed One then manifested another symbolic vision.

The assembly saw two men pulling opposite ends of a rope.

Between them stood a deep chasm.

Neither realized that both were gradually approaching the edge.

A child simply released the rope and walked away.

The two men, deprived of resistance, stumbled forward into reconciliation.

The Buddha explained:

"Many conflicts survive only because attachment continually feeds them.

Release attachment, and much contention dissolves by itself."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, what is the greatest victory?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"Not defeating an opponent.

Not humiliating an adversary.

Not silencing criticism.

The greatest victory is transforming hostility into understanding without creating new resentment.

Such triumph leaves no losers."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then the vision revealed a council chamber where officials argued loudly concerning distant enemies.

Outside the hall an unnoticed physician quietly treated wounded travelers from every side without asking allegiance.

When praised, she answered:

"Pain recognizes no faction."

The Blessed One smiled.

"Thus hidden bodhisattvas preserve the world."

As generations passed, storytellers embroidered these events into legends of secret powers manipulating wars and rivalries from behind the scenes.

The Blessed One clarified:

"There are indeed those who encourage discord for selfish ends.

Yet the deeper architect of conflict is unexamined craving.

Without greed, hatred, and delusion, manipulation finds little purchase.

With greed, hatred, and delusion already present, even ordinary misunderstandings may become calamities.

Therefore cultivate wisdom first."

Then Akṣobhya recited:

The sword is forged
Before battle.

The battle is imagined
Before the sword.

The hatred is nourished
Before the battle.

The ignorance is embraced
Before the hatred.

Therefore uproot ignorance,
And countless wars
Will never begin.

Finally, the Blessed One addressed Sāgaramati directly:

"Remember this always.

The bodhisattva does not deny disagreement.

The bodhisattva denies the illusion that disagreement requires enmity.

The bodhisattva enters disputes to lessen suffering, not to accumulate victory.

Those who profit from endless conflict feed the wheel of saṃsāra.

Those who reconcile enemies turn that wheel toward awakening."

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated immeasurable patience and loving-kindness.

The devas scattered celestial blossoms throughout Abhirati.

The nāga kings vowed to become builders of concord wherever reborn.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed deeply before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly rejoiced in the profound teaching.

Book IV — The Harvest of Fear

Chapter 28

The Creation of Division

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly gathered in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Manipulation of Conflict had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his seat, bowed with palms joined, and respectfully addressed the Blessed One:

"World-Honored One, conflict often arises from disagreements already present. But by what causes do beings deliberately create divisions where none previously existed? How does the illusion of separation multiply within the worlds?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, this question reaches deeply into the workings of ignorance.

Conflict exploits existing attachment.

Division manufactures new attachment.

The former fans embers into flame.

The latter plants sparks where no fire had been.

Attend carefully."

The entire assembly became still.

The jeweled lakes of Abhirati reflected the sapphire radiance of the Tathāgata, and the wish-fulfilling trees gently rang like bells in the wind.

Then the Blessed One emitted a beam of light that illuminated countless realms.

Within that radiance appeared the Human Realm and the declining societies influenced by the habits first cultivated in Raktaloka.

The Buddha said:

"From the beginningless past, beings have distinguished one thing from another.

They distinguish rivers from mountains, morning from evening, medicine from poison.

Such discernment is not itself bondage.

Bondage begins when distinction becomes identity and identity becomes attachment."

In one prosperous kingdom, the people had long lived together in peace.

They differed in dress, dialect, profession, and local customs, yet shared festivals and assisted one another during famine and flood.

A traveler entering the land remarked:

"Your differences are many, yet your friendship is greater."

The inhabitants replied:

"We have learned that cooperation bears sweeter fruit than suspicion."

For many generations this harmony endured.

Then there arrived certain ambitious advisors who sought influence within the royal court.

Finding little unrest to exploit, they quietly altered the language of public discourse.

Instead of saying,

"Our many communities,"

they increasingly spoke of,

"Our competing interests."

Instead of praising shared accomplishments, they measured contributions.

Instead of celebrating diversity of practice, they ranked traditions.

No laws changed.

No armies marched.

Only words shifted.

The Blessed One declared:

"Speech shapes perception.

Perception shapes intention.

Intention shapes karma.

Therefore the wise guard language as carefully as conduct."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, can mere words truly divide a people?"

The Buddha answered:

"A single seed is small.

Yet given water, earth, and time, it becomes a forest.

So too repeated speech conditions the mind until habit appears as nature."

The Blessed One then recited:

Call a person
Your enemy each day,

And soon you forget
They were once your neighbor.

Call a stranger
Your companion each day,

And soon compassion
Finds a doorway.

Thus language
Plants tomorrow's harvest.

The vision shifted.

Children entered newly established schools.

There they learned admirable skills of reading, mathematics, and contemplation.

Yet woven subtly into certain lessons was another message:

"You are unlike them."

At first the distinction concerned harmless customs.

Later it concerned virtue.

Eventually it concerned worth itself.

Students who had once played together freely now hesitated.

Questions arose that earlier generations had never imagined.

"Which group truly built the city?"

"Which lineage deserves greater honor?"

"Which tradition is indispensable?"

The elder teacher Jñānagupta perceived the danger.

He gathered his pupils beneath a great banyan tree and gave each a single leaf.

Then he asked,

"Which leaf sustains the tree?"

The children answered,

"All of them together."

He smiled and replied,

"So too with a people."

Many remembered the lesson for life.

The Buddha praised him before the assembly.

Then another vision appeared.

Merchants who once traded openly began organizing according to narrow affiliations.

Guilds admitted only those who resembled existing members.

Pilgrims avoided shrines associated with unfamiliar regions.

Festivals once shared by all became occasions for comparison.

The divisions deepened not because the differences increased but because attachment to them increased.

The Blessed One said:

"Sāgaramati, ignorance delights in labels.

Wisdom sees conditions.

Ignorance asks,

'To which group do you belong?'

Wisdom asks,

'How may suffering be relieved?'"

Then the Blessed One spoke in verse:

The lotus grows
In many ponds.

The moon reflects
In many lakes.

Yet neither lotus
Nor moon

Divides itself.

Only the grasping mind
Imagines separation.

At that time there arose among the observers influenced by Raktaloka a mistaken doctrine.

Its advocates proclaimed:

"A society functions best when every being knows its permanent place."

To support this view they multiplied classifications.

Occupations became identities.

Customs became boundaries.

Temporary roles became fixed destinies.

The elder nun Padmāśrī publicly opposed them.

Standing before the council she held up a handful of colored sand.

Mixing it together, she asked:

"Can you now separate every grain?"

The scholars replied,

"Only with immense labor."

She answered:

"So too with humanity.

Dependent origination has woven every life into every other.

You seek to divide what conditions have already joined."

Some applauded.

Others dismissed her as impractical.

Yet her disciples carried the teaching into future generations.

The vision then broadened to encompass symbolic imagery.

The assembly beheld an enormous mirror suspended in empty space.

Whenever beings gazed into it while clinging to pride, the mirror fractured into countless shards.

Each shard reflected only one face.

Whenever beings looked with compassion, the fragments reunited into a single clear surface reflecting all beings together.

The Blessed One explained:

"The divisions perceived by ignorance are like cracks in a mirror.

The mirror itself has never truly broken."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, what causes such fractures to heal?"

The Buddha replied:

"Listening before judging.

Serving before demanding.

Giving before claiming.

And remembering that all designations are provisional.

The bodhisattva employs names without becoming imprisoned by them."

There lived in one village a simple ferryman named Maitrin.

Travelers from many backgrounds crossed his river.

Some asked,

"Which side do you favor?"

He laughed gently and answered,

"I favor the crossing."

When disputes arose among passengers, he invited them all to row together.

By the time they reached the opposite shore, many had forgotten the quarrel.

The Blessed One praised him:

"To carry beings across waters while diminishing resentment is itself a form of pāramitā."

As centuries passed, storytellers invented elaborate myths explaining every social difference through secret origins or hidden races.

The Blessed One corrected these misunderstandings.

"Beings differ according to karma, upbringing, environment, language, and innumerable conditions.

Yet none possesses an independent essence that separates it forever from another.

All identities are dependently arisen.

All labels are empty.

All beings remain capable of awakening."

Then Akṣobhya manifested one final parable.

A child sat before a basket containing threads of many colors.

Asked to sort them by shade, the child did so with care.

Asked whether the colors therefore hated one another, the child burst into laughter.

The assembly likewise smiled.

The Blessed One said:

"The innocent often perceive what the learned forget.

Difference need not become division."

Then he concluded with these verses:

Name the mountain.

Name the river.

Name the flower.

But do not cling
To the name.

Distinguish the path.

Distinguish the traveler.

Distinguish the season.

But remember:

Names guide the journey.

They are not
The destination.

When all names are released,
The mirror shines,
The cracks disappear,
And Suchness alone remains.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained profound insight into the emptiness of conceptual divisions.

The devas showered celestial blossoms upon the assembly.

The nāga kings renewed vows to honor diversity without attachment.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rejoiced greatly, and all assembled praised the immeasurable wisdom of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book IV — The Harvest of Fear

Chapter 29

The Thrones Behind Thrones

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Creation of Division had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his seat, placed his palms together, and bowed before the World-Honored One.

He asked:

"Blessed One, many beings speak of unseen powers standing behind visible rulers, directing events while remaining concealed. They speak of 'thrones behind thrones.' How should this be understood in accordance with the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, there are indeed thrones behind thrones.

But the greatest of these are not occupied by hidden kings.

They are occupied by craving, ignorance, pride, and fear.

A visible ruler may believe himself sovereign while secretly obeying attachment.

A wealthy merchant may command caravans while serving greed.

A celebrated sage may instruct multitudes while remaining enslaved to praise.

These are the unseen thrones from which saṃsāra governs beings."

The assembly rejoiced at this teaching.

Then the Blessed One extended a ray of sapphire light.

Within it appeared a mighty palace situated upon a high mountain.

Kings entered its gates.

Queens entered.

Generals, priests, judges, merchants, philosophers, and scholars likewise entered.

Each ascended a magnificent staircase toward an empty throne.

Yet before reaching it, invisible cords descended from the sky and attached themselves to their hearts.

Some cords were woven from gold.

Others from anger.

Others from fear.

Others from vanity.

Though the throne remained vacant, the visitors found themselves pulled in many directions.

The Buddha explained:

"They sought to rule others while failing to master themselves.

Thus their own afflictions became the true occupants of the throne."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, can a ruler free from such cords exist?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"Such a one may arise.

The ruler who continually examines his motives, welcomes wise criticism, relinquishes attachment to office, and governs for the welfare of beings rather than personal glory loosens these cords day by day.

Such stewardship accords with the Dharma.

Yet even this ruler remains subject to impermanence."

The Blessed One then recited:

The highest palace
Cannot outlast decay.

The strongest army
Cannot conquer death.

The deepest treasury
Cannot purchase awakening.

But one moment
Of genuine humility

Surpasses them all.

The vision shifted.

The assembly beheld a prosperous kingdom whose monarch sincerely desired justice.

He consulted sages.

He fed the hungry.

He restrained corruption.

Yet whenever advisors questioned his decisions, irritation arose within him.

He listened outwardly but inwardly thought:

"They fail to appreciate my wisdom."

This unnoticed conceit gradually influenced every judgment.

The ministers, fearing displeasure, ceased offering frank counsel.

Errors accumulated.

The kingdom weakened.

No conspiracy brought about the decline.

Only attachment.

The Buddha declared:

"The hidden throne was occupied by pride."

Nearby lived an obscure washerwoman named Satyā.

Each evening she quietly repaired torn garments left by travelers too poor to pay.

When asked why she devoted herself to unnoticed labor, she replied:

"I prefer worn robes made whole to polished crowns made heavier."

Though no court chronicler recorded her deeds, countless lives were eased by her kindness.

The Blessed One praised her before the assembly.

"Many hidden bodhisattvas sit upon no throne at all."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly saw an elaborate puppet theater.

Beautiful figures danced across the stage.

The audience argued endlessly concerning which puppet possessed greatest authority.

Only a child looked upward and noticed the strings.

Then an elder monk whispered:

"Look higher still."

Above the strings stood not a puppeteer but a mirror reflecting the faces of the audience themselves.

The Blessed One smiled.

"So too beings imagine secret masters directing history.

Often they merely behold the reflections of their own collective attachments."

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed.

He asked:

"World-Honored One, are institutions themselves to blame?"

The Buddha answered:

"No.

Institutions are like vessels.

Some carry medicine.

Some carry poison.

The vessel itself possesses no intention.

Likewise, councils, courts, monasteries, guilds, and kingdoms become wholesome or harmful according to the minds of those who inhabit them.

Blaming structures while neglecting the heart resembles polishing a cup while ignoring spoiled water within."

Then the Blessed One recited:

Repair the wheel,
But examine the driver.

Strengthen the bridge,
But examine the traveler.

Preserve the temple,
But examine the mind.

Without wisdom,
Even sacred halls
Echo with delusion.

At that time, among the heirs of Raktaloka's declining traditions, there arose schools devoted to preserving influence through obscurity.

They believed:

"The unseen advisor exercises greater power than the visible king."

Some therefore sought anonymity not for humility but for advantage.

They hid motives behind courteous words.

They praised transparency while practicing concealment.

For a generation they prospered.

Then suspicion multiplied.

Every misfortune inspired rumors.

Every success inspired conspiracy.

Neighbors doubted neighbors.

Friends questioned friends.

Eventually trust itself became scarce.

The elder Dharmagupta lamented:

"They wished to become invisible and instead made confidence disappear."

His warning spread only slowly.

The Blessed One declared:

"When secrecy exceeds necessity, fear rushes to occupy the empty spaces."

Then he revealed another parable.

A monastery possessed a hidden cellar where emergency grain was stored against famine.

Its existence remained confidential lest thieves steal the provisions.

The secrecy served compassion.

Years later new administrators forgot the purpose of the cellar.

Knowing only that something important was concealed below, they surrounded it with guards, ceremonies, and elaborate rituals.

Pilgrims imagined unimaginable treasures.

Wars nearly erupted over access.

Finally an old gardener unlocked the door.

Inside rested only sacks of aging grain.

Many laughed.

Many wept.

The Buddha explained:

"Not every hidden chamber contains profound mysteries.

Often attachment itself manufactures importance."

Sāgaramati then asked:

"What, Blessed One, is the greatest unseen throne in all the worlds?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"The belief in an independently existing self.

Upon that imagined seat greed sits as minister, hatred as general, pride as counselor, and delusion as scribe.

Dethrone the illusion of self, and the entire court disperses."

The assembly entered deep meditation.

Many attained insight into non-self.

The devas showered celestial blossoms over Abhirati.

The nāga kings reflected upon their own subtle attachments.

Finally Akṣobhya concluded:

"Sāgaramati, later generations invented countless stories of hidden rulers behind earthly governments.

Some stories contained fragments of truth concerning concealed ambitions.

Yet the deepest teaching is this:

Every visible throne is temporary.

Every hidden throne erected by ego eventually collapses.

Only the seat of awakening, empty of self-clinging and established in boundless compassion, remains unshaken.

Therefore seek not secret dominion.

Seek mirror-like wisdom.

Then whether seated upon a throne or upon bare earth, one equally benefits the world."

The Blessed One then spoke these concluding verses:

Sit not above beings.

Sit among them.

Rule not through fear.

Guide through example.

Hide not behind shadows.

Stand in truth.

The greatest king
Needs no crown.

The greatest counselor
Needs no secrecy.

The greatest throne
Is the lotus seat
Of awakened compassion.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated profound humility.

The devas rejoiced.

The nāga kings bowed until their foreheads touched the sapphire ground.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati praised the immeasurable wisdom of Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly rejoiced.

Book IV — The Harvest of Fear

Chapter 30

The Veils of Illusion

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Thrones Behind Thrones had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, joined his palms, and bowed before the World-Honored One.

He asked:

"Blessed One, many beings wander through life believing appearances to be ultimate reality. Others speak of veils that obscure the truth. What are these veils, and by what causes do they arise?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, the greatest veil is not woven by another.

It is woven by ignorance.

Greed supplies the thread.

Hatred knots it.

Fear dyes it.

Conceit embroiders it.

Delusion drapes it over the mind.

Thus beings cease to see Suchness and instead behold only the reflections of their own attachments."

The assembly listened in profound stillness.

Then the Blessed One emitted a ray of sapphire light, and within it appeared a vast plain covered in morning mist.

Travelers wandered in every direction.

Some believed the mist itself was the world.

Others insisted that distant shadows were mountains when in truth they were only clouds.

Still others argued endlessly about shapes they could not clearly perceive.

Only a few waited patiently until the sun rose.

When its light dispelled the fog, the landscape revealed itself naturally.

The Buddha declared:

"Wisdom does not create reality.

It removes obscuration."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, why do beings cling to illusion even when truth is available?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"Because illusion often flatters while truth humbles.

Illusion promises certainty.

Truth invites investigation.

Illusion comforts the ego.

Truth dissolves it."

The Blessed One then spoke these verses:

The dusty mirror
Reflects dust.

The polished mirror
Reflects forms.

The awakened mind
Reflects Suchness
Without grasping.

Polish not the world.

Polish perception.

The vision shifted.

The assembly beheld scholars in the Crystal Kingdoms debating maps of distant lands.

One mapmaker carefully corrected mistakes whenever new information appeared.

Another refused revisions.

He declared:

"If I alter the map, my reputation will suffer."

Travelers relying upon his charts became lost.

The error did not lie in parchment.

It lay in attachment.

Nearby an elderly cartographer quietly erased and redrew boundaries whenever rivers changed course.

Asked why he welcomed correction, he answered:

"I serve the land, not my pride."

The Blessed One praised him before the assembly.

"Thus does the wise practitioner continually revise views in light of deeper understanding."

Then another vision appeared.

In the Human Realm, a prosperous city celebrated an annual Festival of Mirrors.

Citizens carried polished discs through the streets.

Originally the custom symbolized self-examination.

Children were taught:

"Before judging another, first examine your own reflection."

But over generations the meaning shifted.

People competed over whose mirror shone brightest.

Craftsmen produced elaborate frames adorned with jewels.

The festival honored appearance rather than introspection.

One year a wandering nun arrived carrying no mirror at all.

When questioned, she pointed to a quiet pond.

"The still water is sufficient."

Some mocked her simplicity.

Others looked into the pond and, seeing their unadorned reflections, remembered the ancient purpose of the celebration.

The Blessed One smiled gently.

"Many rituals become veils when their meanings are forgotten."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, can doctrines themselves become veils?"

The Buddha replied:

"Indeed.

Even teachings concerning emptiness become obstacles if grasped rigidly.

The Dharma is like a raft crossing a river.

One who reaches the far shore does not continue carrying the raft upon the head."

The assembly rejoiced.

The Buddha continued:

"There were philosophers influenced by the decline of Raktaloka who delighted in increasingly intricate systems.

Every question produced another classification.

Every answer generated another commentary.

Soon they spent their lives discussing the arrangement of concepts while neglecting meditation, ethics, and compassion.

They mistook the map for the journey."

Then the Blessed One recited:

Count not another's steps.

Walk your own.

Catalogue not every star.

Look also at the moon.

Collect not endless teachings.

Practice one fully.

At that time there lived in the Human Realm a humble potter named Sūryadatta.

Each vessel he fashioned contained a tiny deliberate imperfection.

When customers complained, he explained:

"If I strive for flawless appearance, I may forget humility.

The small flaw reminds me that conditioned things are never ultimate."

His bowls became treasured not because they were perfect but because they invited contemplation.

The Blessed One praised him:

"Thus ordinary craft becomes Dharma practice."

The vision then broadened to symbolic dimensions.

The assembly beheld an immense palace built entirely from crystal.

Around it hung seven translucent veils.

The first was named Habit.

The second Opinion.

The third Identity.

The fourth Fear.

The fifth Desire.

The sixth Pride.

The seventh Ignorance.

Many travelers reached the palace but spent their lives decorating the veils rather than passing through them.

Some embroidered Fear with gold.

Some polished Pride until it glittered.

Some argued whether Identity was woven from silk or linen.

Only a child quietly walked between the curtains and entered the empty hall beyond.

The Blessed One explained:

"The palace symbolizes Suchness.

The veils symbolize conditioned perception.

Do not become collectors of veils."

Sāgaramati then asked:

"World-Honored One, how may beings remove these coverings?"

The Buddha answered:

"Not by violence.

Not by hatred toward illusion.

One removes a veil by seeing it clearly.

Mindfulness reveals habit.

Inquiry reveals assumption.

Compassion dissolves fear.

Generosity weakens greed.

Meditation calms confusion.

Prajñā penetrates ignorance.

Thus the veils fall naturally."

Then Akṣobhya revealed another vision.

A monk and a merchant walked together through a desert.

From afar they saw shimmering water.

The merchant rushed toward it and found only hot sand.

The monk smiled gently and continued walking toward an actual oasis hidden beyond a ridge.

Asked how he recognized the mirage, he replied:

"I did not trust desire alone."

The Blessed One said:

"So too the practitioner examines appearances before attachment hardens."

At that moment many bodhisattvas attained deeper insight into the nature of conceptual fabrication.

The devas scattered sapphire-colored blossoms.

The nāga kings reflected upon the veils remaining within their own minds.

Finally the Blessed One addressed Sāgaramati directly:

"Later generations imagined invisible powers casting enchantments over entire civilizations.

Such tales may symbolize an important truth.

For ignorance itself is the oldest enchantment.

It persuades beings that the impermanent is lasting.

That the painful is satisfying.

That the empty possesses inherent self.

That the conditioned can provide ultimate refuge.

This enchantment is called avidyā.

When it ceases, the greatest veil vanishes."

Then the Tathāgata concluded with these verses:

Lift no sword
Against illusion.

Light one lamp.

Chase no shadow
Across the field.

Wait for dawn.

The mirror was never broken.

The sky was never stained.

Only the mist
Obscured the view.

See clearly,
And all veils
Become empty.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas realized profound insight into emptiness and dependent origination.

The devas rejoiced throughout Abhirati.

The nāga kings renewed vows to cultivate mirror-like wisdom.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed deeply before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the whole assembly praised the immeasurable Dharma.

Book IV — The Harvest of Fear

Chapter 31

The Age of Hidden Rule

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue the sacred discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the blissful realm of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Veils of Illusion had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, placed his palms together, and bowed before the World-Honored One.

He asked:

"Blessed One, in many lands there circulate stories that unseen powers secretly govern the affairs of nations and peoples. Some speak of concealed councils, while others imagine hidden empires extending through every generation. What is the true meaning of what later ages call the Age of Hidden Rule?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, hear well and remember.

The most pervasive hidden ruler is not a person but an unexamined habit.

The strongest invisible government is not established by decree but by collective ignorance.

The oldest empire is not built of stone but of karma.

Attend carefully."

The assembly became perfectly silent.

Then the Blessed One emitted a ray of sapphire radiance that illuminated countless world-systems.

Within that light appeared the Human Realm over many centuries.

Kings succeeded kings.

Dynasties rose and vanished.

Republics formed and dissolved.

Cities flourished and crumbled into dust.

Languages changed.

Borders shifted.

Yet beneath all these transformations, certain patterns repeated.

Parents unknowingly transmitted fears to children.

Teachers repeated assumptions inherited from their own teachers.

Merchants preserved customs because they were profitable.

Officials repeated procedures whose original purposes had long been forgotten.

Communities clung to identities even after the conditions that produced them had disappeared.

The Blessed One declared:

"This repetition of conditioned habits is what many later described as Hidden Rule."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, are these patterns unavoidable?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"No.

Whatever arises dependently may also cease dependently.

But what is unseen is seldom questioned.

Therefore mindfulness is the beginning of liberation."

The Blessed One then recited:

The stream follows
Its ancient course

Until one asks,
'Why this direction?'

The wheel turns
Without complaint

Until one examines
The axle.

So too habit
Rules silently

Until wisdom
Awakens.

The vision shifted.

The assembly beheld a prosperous kingdom where every official sincerely believed he acted independently.

Yet each copied the conduct of predecessors without reflection.

Ceremonies continued because ceremonies had always continued.

Policies remained because policies had always remained.

No one paused to inquire whether suffering had actually diminished.

An elderly groundskeeper quietly observed these proceedings for many years.

Finally, when asked his opinion, he simply replied:

"The vines have begun guiding the gardeners."

At first no one understood.

Later generations quoted his saying with reverence.

The Blessed One smiled gently.

"Thus simple speech sometimes penetrates deeper than elaborate philosophy."

In another city lived a magistrate named Dharmapāla.

Upon assuming office he ordered that every law be reviewed once each decade.

His ministers protested:

"Many regulations are ancient and therefore sacred."

Dharmapāla answered:

"Age proves endurance.

It does not prove wisdom.

If a custom continues relieving suffering, preserve it.

If it now multiplies suffering, revise it.

The Dharma does not fear examination."

His reforms were modest.

Yet corruption declined.

Public trust increased.

The Buddha praised him before the assembly.

"The one who reviews inherited habits with compassion weakens Hidden Rule."

Then the Blessed One manifested a symbolic vision.

The assembly saw a colossal wheel turning beneath the earth.

Upon its rim stood countless people convinced they directed its motion.

Some shouted commands.

Some argued.

Some fought.

Yet the wheel continued regardless.

Only a few climbed inward toward the still hub.

Those who reached the center discovered complete tranquility.

The Buddha explained:

"The rim symbolizes reactive existence.

The hub symbolizes mindful awareness.

The farther beings dwell from the center, the more violently conditions seem to spin.

The closer they approach wisdom, the less they are ruled by circumstance."

Sāgaramati bowed and asked:

"Blessed One, what causes so many to remain upon the rim?"

The Buddha answered:

"They mistake momentum for necessity.

They suppose inherited conditions cannot be transformed.

Thus resignation joins ignorance."

Then he spoke in verse:

Say not,
'It has always been so.'

For mountains erode.

Rivers change course.

Stars exhaust their light.

How much more easily
Can habits change
When touched by wisdom?

The vision then broadened to encompass institutions influenced by the lingering conceits first cultivated in Raktaloka.

Certain schools preserved doctrines no longer examined.

Certain guilds defended privileges no longer justified.

Certain religious communities repeated sacred words while forgetting their compassionate intention.

Certain rulers honored justice publicly yet privately nourished resentment.

No hidden cabal directed these developments.

Rather, countless small acts of unexamined repetition reinforced one another until they appeared inevitable.

The Blessed One declared:

"Sāgaramati, dependent origination itself explains much that beings attribute to secret design.

One thought conditions another.

One generation conditions the next.

One custom conditions another custom.

Thus an invisible web emerges without requiring an invisible monarch."

The Bodhisattva reflected deeply.

Then he asked:

"Blessed One, how may one live within such a web without becoming ensnared?"

The Buddha replied:

"Practice the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Observe body as body.

Feeling as feeling.

Mind as mind.

Phenomena as phenomena.

When experience is seen clearly, the cords of unconscious habit loosen.

Then even while dwelling amid conditioned systems, the practitioner is not ruled by them."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then there appeared in the vision a humble seamstress named Candrikā.

Every garment she repaired contained a hidden stitch of blue thread.

Her apprentices eventually asked the reason.

She answered:

"It reminds me to notice what is usually overlooked.

The unseen often determines whether the cloth endures."

The Blessed One praised her.

"Thus ordinary labor becomes contemplation."

Another symbolic vision followed.

The assembly beheld a magnificent puppet theater whose stage filled an entire valley.

The audience argued endlessly about the motives of the puppets.

A child quietly walked backstage expecting to discover secret rulers.

Instead she found only empty strings hanging from beams.

Looking upward she saw the wind moving them.

Looking further still she noticed that even the wind arose from changing weather.

Finally she looked into her own mind and smiled.

The Blessed One explained:

"Search deeply enough, and every chain of causes leads back to ignorance and craving.

Remove these, and Hidden Rule loses its foundation."

Then Akṣobhya addressed Sāgaramati directly:

"Later generations imagined concealed dynasties manipulating history across millennia.

Such stories may express anxiety concerning unseen influences.

Yet the Dharma reveals a more profound reality.

The true hidden ruler is habitual self-clinging.

It appoints greed as minister.

Fear as general.

Conceit as herald.

Resentment as tax collector.

Suspicion as gatekeeper.

When non-self is realized, the palace empties of its officials."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Seek not first
The hidden ruler.

Seek first
The hidden attachment.

Expose not only
The secret council.

Expose
The secret conceit.

For when ignorance
Loses its throne,

Every invisible empire
Falls without battle,

And Suchness
Governs by governing none.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained profound insight into the conditioned nature of institutions and habits.

The devas showered celestial blossoms upon the assembly.

The nāga kings renewed vows to examine inherited assumptions with wisdom and compassion.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed low before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book IV — The Harvest of Fear

Chapter 32

The Great Darkness

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue the profound discourse before the immeasurable assembly gathered in the stainless Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Age of Hidden Rule had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, arranged his robe over one shoulder, and bowed before the Blessed One.

He asked:

"World-Honored One, what was the culmination of these countless small attachments, these subtle manipulations of fear, these habits inherited without examination, and these invisible structures built upon ignorance? Did they reach a final consequence?"

The Blessed One replied:

"They did, Sāgaramati.

Not because darkness possesses an independent nature, but because beings repeatedly turned away from the lamp of wisdom.

The Great Darkness was not the extinction of light.

It was the forgetting that light had always been present."

The entire assembly fell silent.

Even the celestial birds of Abhirati ceased their songs.

Then the Blessed One emitted a vast sapphire radiance that encompassed innumerable worlds.

Within it appeared Raktaloka in its declining age, alongside many kingdoms of the Human Realm.

The assembly saw that prosperity remained.

Markets bustled.

Temples stood.

Schools flourished.

Laws were enforced.

Festivals continued.

From the outside, civilization seemed secure.

Yet inwardly something had changed.

People hurried without reflection.

Teachers repeated lessons without understanding.

Rulers exercised authority without humility.

Merchants accumulated wealth without contentment.

Religious practitioners performed rituals without awakening.

Families gathered yet seldom listened to one another.

The Buddha declared:

"This is how darkness often appears.

Not through the absence of activity but through the absence of awareness."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, how could so many fail to notice?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"Because habit conceals itself.

Fish rarely perceive water.

Those born amid confusion often mistake confusion for normality.

Thus the greatest delusion is the belief that no delusion exists."

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

When lamps grow dim
Little by little,

Eyes adapt
Without complaint.

Soon night
Feels natural,

Though dawn
Waits beyond the hills.

The vision shifted.

The assembly beheld children entering magnificent academies.

They mastered language, mathematics, governance, astronomy, and medicine.

Yet few were instructed in self-examination.

They learned to classify objects but not to observe craving.

They measured stars but neglected anger.

They debated philosophy while ignoring resentment.

Knowledge increased.

Wisdom stagnated.

An elderly instructor named Śuddhamati quietly added one exercise to every lesson.

Before dismissal, students sat in silence for ten breaths.

Many initially considered it a waste of time.

Years later, they remembered those breaths more vividly than entire volumes of instruction.

The Blessed One praised him.

"One moment of mindfulness may illuminate what a thousand books cannot."

Then another vision appeared.

Temples multiplied throughout many lands.

Their roofs glittered with gold.

Pilgrims arrived in great numbers.

Offerings overflowed.

Yet among some communities, reverence for buildings gradually replaced practice of the Path.

People admired statues but neglected compassion.

They memorized scriptures but ignored generosity.

They debated doctrine while harboring envy.

The Buddha said:

"The finger pointing to the moon is useful.

But whoever worships the finger never beholds the moon."

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed and asked:

"World-Honored One, is the Great Darkness merely ignorance?"

The Buddha answered:

"It is ignorance woven together with complacency.

Ordinary ignorance suffers and therefore seeks relief.

The Great Darkness believes itself enlightened while wandering ever deeper into confusion.

For this reason it is especially difficult to dispel."

Then he recited:

The sick who know
They are ill

May seek medicine.

The sick who boast
Of perfect health

Reject the physician
At the gate.

The vision broadened.

Across the Human Realm and the remnants of Raktaloka's influence, countless people sought certainty.

Some clung to wealth.

Some to ideology.

Some to ancestry.

Some to ritual.

Some to power.

Some to skepticism.

Some to secret knowledge.

Each imagined having found permanent refuge.

Yet every refuge built upon conditioned things eventually crumbled.

The assembly saw palaces collapse.

Libraries burn.

Treasuries empty.

Armies disperse.

Languages disappear.

Only karma accompanied beings beyond death.

The Blessed One declared:

"Whatever may be possessed externally can also be lost externally.

Only cultivated virtue accompanies the stream of consciousness."

At that time there lived an obscure mendicant called Anālaya, Without Abode.

He wandered from village to village carrying no possessions except a patched robe and an alms bowl.

Whenever asked where he lived, he answered:

"Where mindfulness is present."

Whenever asked whom he served, he answered:

"Whichever being now stands before me."

Many dismissed him as eccentric.

Yet those who spent even one afternoon in his company often abandoned long-standing grudges.

The Blessed One praised him before the assembly.

"The one who dwells nowhere cannot easily be imprisoned by the Great Darkness."

Then the Tathāgata manifested a symbolic vision.

The assembly saw a colossal cavern extending beneath mountains and oceans.

Within it wandered multitudes carrying lanterns.

Most held their lamps facing outward, illuminating only walls and one another.

Very few turned the light inward.

One child accidentally dropped her lantern.

As she reached to retrieve it, the flame illuminated her own face.

At that instant the cavern brightened for everyone nearby.

The Blessed One explained:

"Self-knowledge shared through compassion dispels darkness more effectively than accusation."

Sāgaramati reflected deeply.

He then asked:

"Blessed One, did no rays of hope remain during this age?"

The Buddha smiled.

"They remained everywhere.

Darkness has no independent existence.

It is merely the temporary absence of illumination.

Throughout every age hidden bodhisattvas appeared.

A mother teaching patience to her child.

A judge refusing a bribe.

A physician comforting the dying.

A laborer sharing food with a stranger.

A monk practicing silent loving-kindness.

A ruler admitting error.

A prisoner forgiving an enemy.

These acts, though unnoticed by history, pierced the darkness like stars in a moonless sky."

Then the Blessed One recited:

Count not only
The storms.

Count also
The candles.

Remember not only
The wars.

Remember also
The reconciliations.

The world endures
Not because hatred is strong,

But because compassion
Quietly refuses
To disappear.

The vision shifted one final time.

The assembly beheld the entire cosmos covered by what seemed an immeasurable black veil.

Many trembled.

But Akṣobhya simply raised one hand.

Immediately countless tiny lights appeared beneath the veil.

Each light represented a single act of mindfulness.

A single truthful word.

A single generous gift.

A single moment of forgiveness.

As their number increased, the darkness became transparent.

Finally it dissolved altogether, revealing that the luminous Dharmadhātu had never been extinguished.

The Blessed One declared:

"So it is with saṃsāra.

The Great Darkness never overcomes Suchness.

It merely obscures it from those who have not yet awakened."

Then Akṣobhya turned toward Sāgaramati and gave this prophecy:

"In ages yet to come, beings will again fear hidden powers, unseen rulers, secret manipulations, and invisible enemies.

Some fears will contain fragments of truth.

Many will arise from projection.

Teach them this instead:

The deepest victory is mastery over one's own greed.

The greatest revolution is the awakening of bodhicitta.

The strongest light is mirror-like wisdom reflecting all phenomena without distortion.

Whoever realizes this already stands beyond the Great Darkness."

Finally, the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Night cannot
Defeat the sun.

Mist cannot
Defeat the sky.

Delusion cannot
Defeat Suchness.

The mirror
Was never broken.

The lamp
Was never extinguished.

Awaken,
And behold

That what you sought
Has always
Been present.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained irreversible progress toward unsurpassed perfect awakening.

The devas showered sapphire and golden blossoms throughout Abhirati.

The nāga kings shed tears of joy that became jeweled lotuses upon the lakes.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed until his forehead touched the radiant ground, and the entire assembly praised the immeasurable wisdom and compassion of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book V — The Vision of Abhirati

Chapter 33

The Birth of the Nāga Sage Sāgaramati

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue the discourse before the immeasurable assembly dwelling in the stainless land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Great Darkness had concluded, innumerable bodhisattvas reflected upon the subtle workings of ignorance. The jeweled trees released blossoms of sapphire hue, and fragrant winds carried them across lakes whose waters reflected all forms without distortion.

Then the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his seat, bowed deeply before the Tathāgata, and spoke:

"World-Honored One, throughout your discourse you have addressed me by name and instructed me patiently. Yet the assembly desires to know how I myself first came to seek the Dharma. By what karma did I arise among the Nāgas, and by what causes did I encounter your liberating teaching?"

The Blessed One smiled, and his countenance shone like a polished sapphire.

"Sāgaramati, your question is not born from vanity but from compassion, for you seek that others may understand the workings of karma and aspiration. Therefore listen well."

The assembly fell silent.

Then the Blessed One emitted a beam of blue radiance that illuminated events long past.

Within that light appeared Raktaloka in an age after much of its decline had already begun.

The Crystal Kingdoms still stood, though many towers were cracked.

The canals still carried water, though their currents had weakened.

Libraries remained filled with scrolls, yet fewer students sought wisdom than prestige.

Even amid this decline, virtuous beings continued to appear.

Among the communities dwelling near the last great inland sea lived a humble pair of Nāga householders named Ratnasena and Karuṇāvatī.

Neither possessed wealth.

Neither held office.

Each morning they repaired fishing nets for neighbors and shared whatever surplus food remained with wanderers.

When questioned about their generosity, Ratnasena would answer:

"Wealth guarded too tightly becomes another prison."

Karuṇāvatī would add:

"A bowl empties and is filled again.

So too should the heart."

The Blessed One declared:

"Though history remembers emperors, the unseen merit of humble compassion often shapes the destinies of worlds."

In time Karuṇāvatī conceived a child.

During the months before the birth she repeatedly dreamed of a vast blue lotus floating upon an immeasurable sea.

Upon its petals rested neither jewels nor crowns but a single clear mirror reflecting stars without distortion.

She reported the dream to wandering contemplatives.

One elderly nun interpreted it thus:

"The child will seek not dominion over reflections but understanding of the mirror itself."

When the child was born, no miraculous armies appeared, nor did mountains tremble.

Instead a gentle rain fell across the drought-stricken valley.

For seven days afterward, neighbors who had quarreled unexpectedly reconciled.

Travelers shared provisions with strangers.

Children abandoned games of rivalry and cooperated in rebuilding damaged wells.

The Blessed One explained:

"These signs did not arise because the infant possessed supernatural authority.

They arose because wholesome karma inspires wholesome conditions."

The child received the name **Sāgaramati**, meaning *Ocean-Minded*, because his parents hoped his compassion would become as vast as the sea from which their people drew sustenance.

From earliest childhood he displayed unusual habits.

When other children argued over toys, he suggested sharing.

When companions mocked the weak, he befriended them.

When injured animals were found along the shoreline, he carried them home despite inconvenience.

One day his father asked,

"Why do you burden yourself with every suffering creature?"

The child replied:

"When another trembles, my own heart refuses to remain still."

Ratnasena bowed his head, realizing the boy had become his teacher.

The Blessed One then recited:

The ocean rejects
No river.

The sky rejects
No cloud.

The bodhisattva rejects
No being.

Thus greatness begins
In ordinary kindness.

As Sāgaramati matured, he displayed an insatiable curiosity.

He questioned merchants concerning distant lands.

He questioned monks concerning meditation.

He questioned craftsmen concerning their trades.

Yet after every answer he asked one further question:

"Does this lessen suffering?"

Some scholars grew impatient.

One famously declared,

"You ask the same thing of every discipline."

The young Sāgaramati answered,

"Then perhaps every discipline should answer it."

The assembly in Abhirati smiled upon hearing this exchange.

When Sāgaramati reached maturity, he entered the great academies of the Crystal Kingdoms.

There he studied history, astronomy, logic, ethics, architecture, poetry, and contemplative practice.

He excelled in every subject.

Teachers predicted a brilliant political career.

Officials invited him to join prestigious councils.

Yet the more he learned, the more uneasy he became.

He observed that many celebrated scholars sought applause rather than truth.

Many officials prized order while neglecting compassion.

Many institutions preserved themselves more carefully than they served the people.

One evening he wandered alone to the shore of the inland sea.

Watching waves dissolve against the rocks, he reflected:

"The water never clings to its own form.

Why then do minds cling so fiercely to opinions?"

Nearby sat an old fisherman mending torn nets.

Without looking up, the elder said:

"The sea teaches those willing to listen."

Sāgaramati asked,

"What is its greatest lesson?"

The fisherman smiled.

"It receives every river yet claims none as its possession."

The youth bowed respectfully.

Years later he would still remember those words.

The Blessed One praised the unnamed fisherman before the assembly.

"Thus wisdom often appears in garments unnoticed by kings."

As the decades passed, Sāgaramati gained renown as a philosopher.

Crowds gathered to hear his lectures.

His essays circulated widely.

His counsel was sought by governors and merchants alike.

Yet each success increased his dissatisfaction.

He perceived that listeners praised eloquence while ignoring practice.

One audience applauded his discourse on generosity before refusing alms to beggars waiting outside.

Another celebrated his lecture on patience while insulting servants during the banquet that followed.

Seeing this contradiction, Sāgaramati's heart became heavy.

He withdrew from public life and journeyed into the mountains.

There he encountered an aged hermit named Vimalaprabha.

The hermit possessed only a reed hut, a clay bowl, and a single blue robe faded by many seasons.

For seven days Sāgaramati observed him.

The old man spoke little.

He meditated before dawn.

Shared food with animals.

Welcomed strangers.

Accepted storms without complaint.

Finally Sāgaramati asked:

"Master, what teaching do you follow?"

Vimalaprabha replied:

"I practice remembering what cannot be possessed."

The younger sage requested instruction.

The hermit pointed toward a still pond.

"Look."

Sāgaramati gazed upon his reflection.

Wind disturbed the surface.

His image shattered into ripples.

When the water calmed, the reflection returned.

The hermit asked,

"Which image is the real one?"

After long silence Sāgaramati answered,

"Neither. The face itself stands apart from both appearances."

The hermit nodded.

"So too with the mind.

Do not mistake disturbed perceptions for ultimate reality."

These words entered Sāgaramati's heart like rain entering fertile soil.

From that day onward his inquiries shifted.

He no longer sought merely effective institutions or elegant philosophies.

He sought direct realization of Suchness.

The Blessed One then revealed another vision.

While meditating beside the pond, Sāgaramati perceived countless ripples spreading from a single pebble dropped into water.

He understood that every intention influences innumerable beings through dependent origination.

No action remains isolated.

No kindness is lost.

No cruelty ends with itself.

He wept—not from despair, but from the sudden recognition of universal interdependence.

Then he uttered a vow:

"May whatever understanding arises in me never become a source of pride.

May every insight become medicine for suffering beings.

May I seek wisdom not to govern others but to liberate myself from self-clinging and assist all who wander in saṃsāra."

At that very moment, though separated by inconceivable distances, a lotus bloomed spontaneously upon a lake in Abhirati.

The Blessed Akṣobhya smiled.

The devas rejoiced.

The nāga kings bowed.

For the aspiration of bodhicitta had arisen in another world.

The Tathāgata turned to the assembly and declared:

"Know this well.

Sāgaramati became worthy not because of noble birth, hidden lineage, psychic ability, or extraordinary intellect.

He became worthy because doubt matured into humility, humility matured into inquiry, inquiry matured into wisdom, and wisdom matured into compassion.

This is the birth praised by all Buddhas."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Blessed is not
The child of kings,

But the child
Of compassion.

Great is not
The master of cities,

But the master
Of self-clinging.

Born is not only
The body,

But also the vow

That says,

'For the welfare
Of all beings,
I shall awaken.'

When these words had been spoken, countless bodhisattvas generated the aspiration to cultivate doubt free from cynicism and wisdom joined inseparably with compassion.

The devas scattered celestial blossoms over the jeweled fields of Abhirati.

The nāga kings rejoiced that one of their own had turned from worldly acclaim toward the Dharma.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed with profound gratitude before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the whole assembly praised the immeasurable teaching.

Book V — The Vision of Abhirati

Chapter 34

The Doubt Concerning Dominion

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the account of the birth and early life of the Nāga Sage Sāgaramati had concluded, the Bodhisattva bowed before the Blessed One and remained silent for a long time.

At last he spoke:

"World-Honored One, from childhood I witnessed the pursuit of influence among scholars, rulers, merchants, and contemplatives alike. Some sought dominion through wealth, others through knowledge, others through fear, and still others through the promise of safety. Yet I found no lasting peace among them.

How did doubt concerning dominion arise within my own heart, and why did that doubt become the gateway to the Dharma rather than the gateway to despair?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, wholesome doubt differs from cynical doubt.

Cynical doubt destroys trust without cultivating wisdom.

Wholesome doubt examines appearances so that deeper understanding may arise.

One closes the eye.

The other opens it."

The assembly listened with minds free from distraction.

Then the Blessed One manifested another vision.

The youthful Sāgaramati had completed his studies and become widely respected throughout the Crystal Kingdoms.

Governors requested his counsel.

Monasteries invited him to lecture.

Judges quoted his writings.

Merchants sought his advice concerning ethics.

Everywhere he traveled, people praised his brilliance.

Yet praise no longer delighted him.

Instead it produced unease.

For after every public celebration he observed the same conditions returning.

The poor remained anxious.

The powerful remained insecure.

The learned envied one another.

The generous occasionally became proud of generosity itself.

Even successful reforms decayed with time.

Walking alone after one great festival, Sāgaramati looked upon banners fluttering in the wind and thought:

"If every victory fades, what truly deserves pursuit?"

The question followed him like a shadow.

One evening he attended a banquet hosted by influential ministers.

The hall glittered with polished crystal.

Music echoed through vaulted ceilings.

The guests debated statecraft with confidence.

One minister declared:

"The highest calling is to govern nations."

Another replied:

"No, it is to accumulate knowledge."

A wealthy merchant insisted:

"Prosperity alone secures happiness."

A military commander proclaimed:

"Without strength, all other virtues perish."

Finally they turned to Sāgaramati.

"And what say you?"

He remained silent for several breaths before answering:

"I have observed kings unable to command sleep.

Scholars unable to quiet anxiety.

Merchants unable to purchase contentment.

Generals unable to conquer old age.

Therefore I continue my search."

The hall fell silent.

Some admired his humility.

Others dismissed him as impractical.

The Blessed One declared:

"Thus the first crack appeared in the palace of dominion."

Then he spoke these verses:

He who doubts
The value of gold

May discover generosity.

He who doubts
The value of conquest

May discover peace.

He who doubts
The value of self

May discover Suchness.

The vision shifted.

News reached Sāgaramati of a distant ruler celebrated as the greatest sovereign of his age.

Curious, he journeyed many weeks to observe the monarch firsthand.

The king possessed immense wealth.

His armies stretched beyond the horizon.

His advisors numbered in the thousands.

His decrees reached every province.

Yet each night guards patrolled his chambers in fear of assassination.

He tasted every meal only after servants tested it.

He trusted no messenger completely.

Even dreams disturbed him.

Returning home, Sāgaramati remarked to his companions:

"The prison built from suspicion requires no walls."

Nearby an elderly gardener overheard these words.

Without introducing himself he simply said:

"The tree laden with the sweetest fruit also bends lowest."

Sāgaramati thanked him and reflected for many days.

Then there arose another occasion.

The academies convened a Grand Symposium concerning the future of civilization.

The finest scholars debated systems of governance.

Some proposed increasingly elaborate bureaucracies.

Others argued for stricter discipline.

Others advocated perfect planning through mathematical calculation.

Each believed sufficient refinement would eliminate suffering.

When invited to speak, Sāgaramati approached the podium carrying only a mirror.

He placed it before the audience.

No explanation followed.

The scholars waited impatiently.

Finally one demanded:

"What argument does this represent?"

Sāgaramati answered:

"Every institution reflects the minds constructing it.

Until greed, hatred, and delusion are examined here"—he pointed toward the mirror—"they will merely reappear elsewhere."

Many listeners applauded politely without understanding.

A few quietly entered meditation that very evening.

The Blessed One smiled.

"Thus seeds are planted whose harvest may not appear for generations."

Then Sāgaramati wandered among ordinary villages.

There he found greater peace than in royal courts.

He met a ferryman who refused extra payment from widows.

A physician who treated enemies without distinction.

Children who divided food equally among strangers.

An elderly woman who spent every morning repairing worn sandals left anonymously outside her door.

None considered themselves philosophers.

Yet all embodied the Dharma more naturally than many celebrated intellectuals.

The Blessed One then recited:

Seek not only
The loud teacher.

Seek the quiet life.

The sermon
May be spoken

By worn hands
Mending another's shoes.

One autumn afternoon Sāgaramati climbed a ridge overlooking both the sea and the Crystal Kingdoms.

Clouds drifted across the red sky.

Watching their changing forms, he reflected:

"Clouds appear to rule the heavens.

Yet none remain.

Power appears permanent only to those who do not wait."

As he contemplated this, a flock of birds crossed overhead in perfect formation before scattering effortlessly into open sky.

He suddenly understood that cooperation required no domination.

Order need not arise from coercion.

Harmony could emerge from shared conditions freely embraced.

Tears filled his eyes.

The Blessed One explained to the assembly:

"This insight weakened the deepest root of conceit.

For Sāgaramati began suspecting that true leadership consists not in controlling beings but in awakening them."

Then the vision broadened.

The Bodhisattva visited prisons, marketplaces, monasteries, farms, and courts.

Everywhere he asked the same question:

"What do you fear losing?"

The answers differed.

Some feared wealth.

Some reputation.

Some family.

Some certainty.

Some authority.

Some memory.

Some youth.

Very few answered,

"I fear losing compassion."

Returning from these journeys, Sāgaramati entered solitary retreat.

There he inscribed upon a stone tablet:

"Whatever requires another's ignorance for its
own continuation cannot be the highest good."

Generations later, this saying circulated throughout Raktaloka.

Some interpreted it politically.

Some spiritually.

The wisest understood both.

Then Sāgaramati addressed the hermit Vimalaprabha once more.

"Master, if dominion over others is empty, should one reject all responsibility?"

The old hermit shook his head.

"The shepherd who abandons the flock out of disgust is no better than the wolf.

Perform responsibilities.

Release ownership.

Guide without grasping.

Serve without becoming the servant of praise."

These words entered Sāgaramati's heart more deeply than any formal lecture.

The Blessed One praised the hermit before the assembly.

Then he manifested one final symbolic vision.

The Bodhisattva stood before two gates.

One bore the inscription:

Power Over Others.

The other:

Mastery of Self.

Many travelers hurried through the first gate, beyond which stretched endless corridors leading to larger doors marked Authority, Prestige, Influence, and Legacy.

Each corridor curved back upon itself.

The second gate opened onto a narrow footpath through quiet woods.

After many difficult steps it emerged into a boundless lotus field beneath an open sky.

No walls enclosed it.

No throne dominated it.

Yet every traveler there moved freely and joyfully.

The Blessed One explained:

"The first path circles saṃsāra.

The second approaches awakening."

Then Akṣobhya turned toward Sāgaramati and declared:

"Your doubt concerning dominion was itself a great blessing.

Because you questioned power, you sought wisdom.

Because you questioned certainty, you sought direct realization.

Because you questioned yourself, you approached non-self.

Therefore never despise wholesome doubt.

Properly cultivated, it becomes the doorway through which bodhicitta enters the world."

Finally, the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Doubt the crown.

Doubt the sword.

Doubt the mirror
When pride admires itself.

But never doubt

That compassion
Outlasts empires,

That wisdom
Outshines authority,

And that one mind
Freed from grasping

Benefits worlds
Beyond counting.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained deeper confidence in the union of inquiry and faith.

The devas scattered sapphire lotuses across the jeweled plains of Abhirati.

The nāga kings rejoiced that sincere questioning had become the beginning of liberation rather than its obstacle.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed deeply before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly praised the immeasurable Dharma.

Book V — The Vision of Abhirati

Chapter 35

The Journey Beyond the Worlds

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Doubt Concerning Dominion had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before the Blessed One and asked:

"World-Honored One, having become dissatisfied with power, reputation, and worldly accomplishment, by what path did I come to behold realms beyond my own? Was it by bodily travel, by magical artifice, or by some other means in accordance with the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, know this well.

No ship sails to enlightenment.

No machine crosses the ocean of saṃsāra.

The journey beyond the worlds is undertaken through purification of conduct, concentration of mind, and perfection of wisdom.

As the mind becomes free from grasping, its vision widens beyond the narrow boundaries of self."

The assembly listened with profound attention.

Then the Blessed One emitted a ray of sapphire radiance, revealing another vision.

After withdrawing from the affairs of courts and academies, Sāgaramati journeyed to a remote mountain overlooking the last great inland sea of Raktaloka.

There stood an abandoned observatory once devoted to measuring the motions of stars.

Its crystal dome had cracked.

Its instruments lay covered in dust.

Yet silence filled the place with uncommon peace.

The Bodhisattva resolved to remain there.

He repaired only enough of the structure to shelter from wind and rain.

He planted a small garden.

He accepted food from passing villagers only when offered freely.

The remainder of his days were devoted to meditation.

For many months his mind wandered continually.

He remembered debates.

He replayed conversations.

He imagined future reforms.

He regretted old mistakes.

Seeing this, he sighed:

"I have left the cities, yet the cities have not left me."

The Blessed One smiled gently.

"So begins the true pilgrimage."

Then the Tathāgata recited:

Leave one palace,
And another appears
Within the mind.

Cross one river,
And another flows
Within memory.

Only by seeing
Thought as thought
Does the traveler
Reach the farther shore.

The vision continued.

Each morning before sunrise, Sāgaramati practiced mindfulness of breathing.

At midday he cultivated loving-kindness toward all beings.

At dusk he contemplated impermanence.

At night he meditated upon emptiness while gazing through the broken dome at the stars.

Seasons passed.

Snow covered the mountain.

Spring flowers returned.

Birds nested in the abandoned towers.

His fame gradually faded from public memory.

The loss brought him unexpected relief.

One day a merchant climbed the mountain seeking advice.

Finding only a solitary practitioner tending vegetables, he asked,

"Where is the famous philosopher Sāgaramati?"

The Bodhisattva smiled and answered,

"He has been diminishing."

The merchant left puzzled.

The devas, observing from afar, rejoiced.

At length Sāgaramati entered profound samādhi.

His breathing became subtle.

Thoughts subsided.

Concepts dissolved.

For the first time he perceived directly that every sensation, memory, and identity arose dependent upon conditions and vanished without remainder.

He exclaimed inwardly:

"Nothing possesses itself.

Nothing exists apart from causes.

How marvelous!"

The Blessed One declared:

"At that moment the first gate beyond the worlds opened."

Then another vision appeared.

During meditation Sāgaramati beheld a vast net extending through immeasurable space.

At every intersection hung a luminous jewel.

Within each jewel were reflected all the others without obstruction.

Whenever one brightened, every reflection subtly changed.

Whenever one dimmed, all were affected.

The Bodhisattva asked within the vision:

"What is this?"

An unseen voice replied:

"It is but a symbol of dependent origination.

No being awakens alone."

The assembly recognized this as a skillful means illustrating universal interdependence.

Then Sāgaramati encountered dreams of extraordinary clarity.

He beheld worlds inhabited by devas intoxicated by pleasure, asuras consumed by rivalry, pretas tormented by insatiable craving, animals struggling through instinct, and humans balancing suffering with opportunity.

He saw nāga realms beneath jewel seas and celestial gardens suspended among clouds.

Upon awakening, he did not cling to these visions.

Instead he reflected:

"Whatever their appearance, all conditioned realms remain impermanent."

The Blessed One praised this discernment.

Then he recited:

Marvel not
At distant heavens.

Marvel
That kindness exists.

Seek not first
Another world.

Understand this one,
And the others
Reveal themselves naturally.

At that time several disciples climbed the mountain and urged Sāgaramati to return to public life.

"The kingdoms require your wisdom.

The councils await your leadership."

He answered:

"If my wisdom depends upon their praise, it is not wisdom.

If my leadership depends upon their obedience, it is not leadership.

Allow me first to govern this wandering mind."

Most departed disappointed.

One young novice remained.

For seven years he quietly tended the garden without requesting instruction.

Finally Sāgaramati asked,

"Why have you stayed so long?"

The novice replied,

"I wished to see whether your silence taught more than your speeches."

The Bodhisattva laughed warmly.

"It has taught me the same."

The Blessed One smiled.

"Thus teacher and disciple exchanged gifts."

Then the vision deepened.

During one especially profound meditation, distinctions between near and far lost their ordinary meaning.

Without moving from his seat, Sāgaramati perceived innumerable Buddha-fields appearing like reflections in perfectly still water.

Some shimmered with golden light.

Some with emerald radiance.

Some with crimson brilliance.

Each displayed different skillful means suited to its inhabitants.

Yet all revealed the same Dharma.

He understood that awakened compassion assumes countless forms without abandoning emptiness.

Overcome with gratitude, he bowed mentally to every direction.

The Blessed One addressed the assembly:

"This should not be interpreted as bodily travel through ordinary space.

Rather, as concentration deepens and obscurations diminish, the range of contemplative vision expands beyond conventional limitations.

The purified mind beholds realities hidden by ignorance."

Sāgaramati then experienced a symbolic encounter.

He found himself standing before a river too vast to cross.

Its waters consisted of memories, ambitions, fears, identities, victories, and regrets.

Many travelers attempted to swim while clutching heavy bundles.

They quickly sank.

An old ferryman appeared carrying an empty boat.

"What fare do you require?" asked Sāgaramati.

The ferryman answered,

"Leave your baggage."

Immediately understanding, Sāgaramati laid aside every imagined possession.

The river carried him effortlessly to the opposite shore.

Upon awakening from meditation, he realized that attachment, not distance, had always been the obstacle.

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

The farther shore
Lies not ahead,

But beneath
The burden released.

The traveler
Who abandons self

Arrives
Before taking a step.

As years passed, subtle luminosity appeared in Sāgaramati's meditative experience.

He perceived thoughts arising before speech.

He sensed anger dissolving before action.

He noticed compassion spreading quietly through communities touched by a single generous deed.

Yet whenever extraordinary perceptions emerged, he reminded himself:

"Marvels are not liberation.

Only the extinction of greed, hatred, and delusion is liberation."

For this reason, psychic attainments never distracted him.

The Blessed One praised him greatly.

Then Akṣobhya manifested one final vision.

At the summit of the mountain observatory stood a weathered mirror once used to reflect starlight into scientific instruments.

Sāgaramati cleaned decades of accumulated dust from its surface.

As the final layer disappeared, the mirror reflected not only the heavens but also his own face.

At that instant he understood:

"The worlds beyond are revealed when the mirror within is polished."

The mirror neither created the stars nor altered them.

It merely ceased obscuring them.

The Blessed One explained:

"So too the purified mind neither manufactures Suchness nor changes it.

It simply reflects reality without distortion."

Then Akṣobhya addressed Sāgaramati directly:

"The journey beyond the worlds is the gradual relinquishment of every world falsely imagined as permanent.

The traveler passes beyond kingdoms, identities, doctrines, fears, ambitions, and even attachment to attainment itself.

Only then does the vision of Abhirati become possible."

Finally, the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Walk beyond
The prison of opinion.

Walk beyond
The palace of praise.

Walk beyond
The mountain of self.

Then every direction
Becomes the Path.

For the greatest distance
In all the cosmos

Is the span

Between ignorance
And awakening.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas entered profound samādhi.

The devas scattered sapphire blossoms through the skies of Abhirati.

The nāga kings contemplated the mirror-like nature of mind.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed deeply before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the whole assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book V — The Vision of Abhirati

Chapter 36

The Vision of Abhirati

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue the sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly gathered in the stainless Buddha-field of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Journey Beyond the Worlds had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, bowed with palms joined, and respectfully addressed the World-Honored One:

"Blessed One, by what causes and conditions did I first behold this incomparable realm? How did the vision of Abhirati arise within a mind still dwelling in another world?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, Abhirati is not discovered by traveling eastward, nor reached by crossing seas or ascending mountains. It is encountered when delusion is relinquished and the mind becomes receptive to truth.

Those who cling to greed may stand within a Pure Land and perceive only dust.

Those who cultivate wisdom may glimpse a Pure Land while seated beneath a weathered tree.

Listen carefully."

The assembly became perfectly still.

Then the Blessed One emitted a brilliant sapphire ray that extended beyond measure, illuminating countless Buddha-fields.

Within its radiance the assembly beheld Sāgaramati seated alone in meditation beneath the cracked dome of the mountain observatory upon Raktaloka.

His breathing had become subtle.

His thoughts settled like snowflakes upon a windless lake.

The distinction between observer and observed gradually loosened.

At that moment, without force or expectation, his mind entered a clarity unlike any he had previously known.

He neither sought visions nor resisted them.

The Buddha declared:

"Because he neither grasped nor rejected experience, the conditions ripened for profound perception."

Then the scene changed.

Before Sāgaramati there appeared not a city descending from heaven nor a miraculous portal opening in the air.

Instead the ordinary mountain landscape became increasingly transparent.

The stones seemed luminous.

The wind itself appeared filled with quiet awareness.

Birdsong harmonized with the rhythm of his breath.

Every phenomenon revealed immeasurable interdependence.

As attachment subsided, another dimension of reality became perceptible.

The Blessed One said:

"Abhirati was not manufactured in that moment.

Its presence had never been absent.

Only obscuration had diminished."

Then the Tathāgata spoke in verse:

The moon
Need not be created

When clouds depart.

The mirror
Needs no polishing

Beyond the removal
Of dust.

So too the Pure Land
Appears

When ignorance
Falls away.

The vision deepened.

Sāgaramati beheld an immeasurable expanse adorned with sapphire-colored earth, level and pure, free from thorns and corruption.

Crystal rivers flowed without flooding.

Lotuses of blue, white, gold, and silver opened upon tranquil waters.

Their fragrance carried not intoxication but mindfulness.

Trees formed from precious substances swayed without attachment to wind.

Every leaf reflected every other leaf.

Every dewdrop mirrored innumerable worlds.

No being competed for territory.

No creature hoarded abundance.

The very atmosphere seemed composed of compassion and clarity.

Yet Sāgaramati noticed something remarkable.

Nothing in Abhirati demanded admiration.

Its beauty did not compel attachment.

Rather, it gently encouraged relinquishment.

The Blessed One explained:

"This is why it is called a Pure Land.

Its conditions support awakening rather than distraction."

Then Sāgaramati perceived countless bodhisattvas walking along jeweled pathways.

Though their appearances differed, each greeted every other with equal respect.

Some instructed novices.

Some tended gardens.

Some copied scriptures.

Some comforted newly arrived beings.

Some sat in meditation beside lakes.

No task was considered superior.

No laborer envied a teacher.

No teacher despised a gardener.

Every activity expressed bodhicitta.

The Bodhisattva wondered:

"Who governs this realm?"

A nearby monk smiled and pointed toward the clear surface of a pond.

Looking into it, Sāgaramati saw only reflections of the sky.

He understood that wisdom itself governed.

The Blessed One smiled before the assembly.

"Where greed has ceased, little governance is required."

Then another marvelous sight appeared.

The birds of Abhirati sang.

Yet their songs were not ordinary melodies.

Some articulated the Four Noble Truths.

Some proclaimed dependent origination.

Others extolled generosity, patience, diligence, concentration, and wisdom.

Still others chanted:

"All conditioned things are impermanent.

All conditioned things are unsatisfactory.

All phenomena are empty of independent self.

Nirvāṇa is peace."

Those who listened did not become attached to the birds.

Rather, their own minds naturally inclined toward practice.

The Blessed One recited:

The finest sermon
May come from silence.

The finest scripture
May appear as birdsong.

Where wisdom fills conditions,
Every sound
Becomes Dharma.

The vision expanded further.

Sāgaramati beheld assemblies where devas conversed respectfully with nāgas, humans with celestial beings, monks with householders, and children with ancient sages.

Differences of form produced no conceit.

All understood that rebirths differed while Buddha-Nature remained universally accessible.

No being asked,

"From what lineage do you descend?"

Instead they asked,

"What suffering may we relieve together today?"

The Blessed One declared:

"Such questions preserve purity."

Then Sāgaramati encountered a great library whose shelves extended beyond sight.

Curious, he entered expecting immeasurable volumes.

Instead many shelves stood empty.

A librarian bowed and explained:

"The unwritten books contain truths realized directly through meditation.

No script can replace awakening."

Sāgaramati laughed with delight.

He understood immediately.

Nearby stood another hall containing mirrors rather than manuscripts.

Each visitor who gazed within saw not the face but the attachments requiring relinquishment.

Some mirrors revealed pride.

Some fear.

Some resentment.

Some hidden generosity awaiting expression.

No two reflections were identical.

The librarian explained:

"Every practitioner studies the appropriate text."

The Blessed One praised this skillful means.

Then he spoke in verse:

Read the sutra
Of your own mind.

Turn the pages
With mindfulness.

Correct the errors
With compassion.

Bind the volume
With wisdom.

The vision continued.

Sāgaramati approached the shore of an immense sapphire lake.

Its waters reflected not only nearby mountains but stars from innumerable universes.

Looking closely, he perceived every reflection perfectly clear despite continual ripples.

He asked a bodhisattva standing nearby:

"How can disturbed water produce undistorted images?"

The bodhisattva answered:

"The lake reflects because it does not cling.

The mind reflects truly for the same reason."

Upon hearing these words, Sāgaramati entered a deeper absorption than ever before.

He realized that mirror-like wisdom does not suppress phenomena.

It allows them to appear precisely as they are without grasping, aversion, or confusion.

At that instant, innumerable lotuses blossomed across the lake.

The Blessed One declared to the assembly:

"This insight accords with the heart of my Pure Land."

Then another symbolic encounter unfolded.

Sāgaramati met a child carrying an empty bowl.

The child dipped it into the lake.

Instead of water, the bowl filled with light.

He drank.

The light neither diminished nor overflowed.

Seeing Sāgaramati's astonishment, the child said:

"Compassion behaves in this way."

The Bodhisattva bowed to the child, recognizing profound wisdom concealed within simplicity.

The assembly rejoiced.

Finally Sāgaramati reached a hill overlooking the entirety of Abhirati.

He expected to behold walls enclosing the Pure Land.

There were none.

He searched for borders.

None appeared.

He asked,

"Where does Abhirati end?"

A voice answered from every direction:

"When compassion ends."

At once he understood that the Pure Land is immeasurable because the activity of awakening is immeasurable.

Its essence cannot be confined by maps.

The Blessed One then addressed Sāgaramati directly:

"Know this well.

Your first vision of Abhirati did not occur because you escaped one world and entered another.

It occurred because the habits obscuring reality temporarily subsided.

Thus you glimpsed a Buddha-field where all conditions support liberation.

Do not cling even to this vision.

Instead cultivate the causes through which countless beings may realize it for themselves."

Then Akṣobhya concluded with these verses:

Seek not merely
The jeweled road.

Walk
The path of compassion.

Seek not merely
The lotus lake.

Purify
The heart.

Seek not merely
Abhirati.

Become
A cause

By which every world
Moves one step closer
To awakening.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained profound confidence in the reality of Buddha-fields and the practice of mirror-like wisdom.

The devas scattered sapphire blossoms that remained suspended in the air like stars.

The nāga kings bowed in reverence.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati prostrated before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly rejoiced in the inconceivable Dharma.

Book V — The Vision of Abhirati

Chapter 37

The Meeting with Akṣobhya

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the stainless Buddha-field of Abhirati.

When the account of the Vision of Abhirati had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, bowed until his forehead touched the sapphire ground, and asked:

"World-Honored One, after beholding this wondrous realm, by what causes and conditions did I come into your presence? How did I, still burdened by the habits of saṃsāra, dare to approach the Thus-Gone One?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, no being reaches a Buddha by force.

No gate is opened by status.

No realm is entered by pride.

The Tathāgata is encountered when humility, merit, and wisdom mature together.

Listen carefully."

The assembly fell into profound silence.

Then the Blessed One emitted a ray of sapphire light that revealed the memory of Sāgaramati's first audience with the Buddha.

After beholding the splendor of Abhirati, Sāgaramati did not rush forward.

Instead he remained motionless upon the shore of the great sapphire lake.

His first thought was not admiration but hesitation.

He reflected:

"How can one still burdened by subtle conceit stand before a Fully Awakened One?"

As this thought arose, a gentle voice sounded from behind him.

Turning, he saw an elderly monk watering a bed of blue lotuses.

The monk's robe was patched.

His sandals were worn.

No halo surrounded him.

Seeing Sāgaramati's uncertainty, the gardener smiled.

"Why do you remain here?"

Sāgaramati answered,

"I fear that my mind is not yet pure enough."

The gardener dipped his hands into the lake and lifted a single muddy lotus root.

"Tell me," he asked, "where did this flower begin?"

"In the mud," replied Sāgaramati.

"And where does it bloom?"

"In the sunlight."

The old monk nodded.

"So too with bodhisattvas."

Having spoken, he returned quietly to his work.

The Blessed One addressed the assembly:

"Many later realized that the gardener himself had long cultivated inconceivable merit, though he sought no recognition.

Such hidden bodhisattvas adorn every Buddha-field."

Then the Tathāgata recited:

The lotus
Does not apologize
For rising from mud.

The physician
Does not reject
The sick.

The Buddha
Does not refuse
The sincere seeker.

Therefore approach
With humility,
Not shame.

Encouraged by these words, Sāgaramati continued along a crystal pathway lined with wish-fulfilling trees.

As he walked, he noticed that every being he encountered bowed not only to Buddhas but to one another.

Children bowed to elders.

Elders bowed to children.

Monastics bowed to gardeners.

Gardeners bowed to scholars.

Even celestial beings greeted insects with mindful care.

Puzzled, Sāgaramati asked a passing novice:

"Why do all bow equally?"

The novice replied:

"Because we do not know through whom wisdom will next appear."

The answer entered Sāgaramati's heart more deeply than many volumes of philosophy.

Further along the path he came upon a hall with neither walls nor doors.

Within sat countless bodhisattvas in perfect silence.

Some radiated dazzling light.

Others appeared entirely ordinary.

Unable to distinguish teacher from student, Sāgaramati quietly took the lowest seat available.

Hours passed.

No one instructed him.

No ceremony began.

At length he realized that his impatience itself was the lesson.

The Blessed One smiled gently.

"The mind seeking immediate attainment often overlooks present awakening."

Then he spoke in verse:

The hurried traveler
Passes the spring.

The patient traveler
Drinks.

The hurried seeker
Passes the Dharma.

The patient seeker
Becomes still.

At that moment a breeze moved through the open hall.

The bells hanging from jeweled branches rang together.

Every bodhisattva rose simultaneously and turned toward the eastern horizon.

There, walking neither quickly nor slowly, appeared the Blessed Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

No armies announced his coming.

No thunder preceded him.

No command compelled reverence.

Yet as he approached, every heart naturally inclined toward serenity.

The very air seemed transparent.

The lakes became perfectly still.

Even the birds paused their songs.

Sāgaramati later reflected:

"It was not that the Buddha altered the world.

Rather, in his presence, the world appeared free from my projections."

The Blessed One explained:

"The Tathāgata imposes nothing.

He merely reveals Suchness."

As Akṣobhya drew near, Sāgaramati expected extraordinary brilliance.

Instead he perceived remarkable simplicity.

The Buddha's robe bore careful patches where earlier cloth had worn thin.

His alms bowl displayed signs of long use.

His gait resembled that of an ordinary monk.

Yet every movement manifested complete mindfulness.

Every glance radiated immeasurable compassion.

Every silence taught as eloquently as speech.

Unable to restrain himself, Sāgaramati prostrated fully upon the sapphire earth.

He remained there until the Blessed One addressed him.

"Rise, child of good family."

Sāgaramati obeyed but kept his gaze lowered.

He confessed:

"World-Honored One, I have pursued knowledge, reputation, and influence.

I have spoken eloquently while understanding little.

I have sought reform while neglecting my own mind.

How can one such as I receive instruction?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"If you had already believed yourself complete, instruction would be difficult.

Because you recognize incompleteness, the Path opens."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then the Blessed One recited:

The full cup
Receives nothing.

The empty bowl
Receives nourishment.

The closed hand
Grasps dust.

The open hand
Receives rain.

So too
With wisdom.

After this exchange, Sāgaramati expected profound metaphysical teachings.

Instead Akṣobhya invited him to accompany several monks tending the gardens surrounding the great lakes.

For many days they transplanted lotuses, repaired irrigation channels, and swept pathways used by pilgrims.

Not once did the Buddha discuss philosophy.

Finally Sāgaramati asked one elder,

"When will instruction begin?"

The monk looked surprised.

"It already has."

Only then did Sāgaramati understand that attention brought to simple labor purified the mind more effectively than endless speculation.

The Blessed One declared:

"Those who seek awakening while despising ordinary duties walk with one foot."

Another event then occurred.

A novice accidentally shattered an ancient crystal vase treasured by generations.

Seeing the broken pieces, Sāgaramati anticipated reprimand.

Instead Akṣobhya calmly helped gather the fragments.

He remarked only:

"The vase has fulfilled impermanence."

No anger arose.

No blame was assigned.

The novice wept, not from fear but from gratitude.

Witnessing this, Sāgaramati realized that non-attachment did not diminish care.

It perfected it.

Then the Tathāgata spoke in verse:

Hold carefully.

Release gently.

Repair faithfully.

Accept endings.

Thus compassion
And impermanence
Walk together.

During the following weeks Sāgaramati accompanied the Buddha on visits throughout Abhirati.

He observed that Akṣobhya devoted equal attention to renowned bodhisattvas and newly arrived practitioners.

He answered difficult philosophical inquiries with patience.

He also stopped to comfort frightened children, greet laborers by name, and feed birds gathered along the pathways.

No distinction existed between great compassion and small compassion.

Each act expressed the same boundless intention.

At length Sāgaramati gathered courage to ask:

"Blessed One, what quality above all distinguishes a Buddha?"

Akṣobhya remained silent.

He then knelt beside an ant struggling to cross a puddle formed by recent rain.

Using a fallen leaf, he gently lifted the tiny creature onto dry ground.

Only afterward did he answer:

"This."

The entire assembly in the vision was moved.

Many shed tears.

The Blessed One explained:

"Mirror-like wisdom reflects all beings equally.

Therefore the Buddha overlooks none."

Finally Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, why did you receive me with such kindness when my understanding remained incomplete?"

Akṣobhya replied:

"I did not receive an accomplished sage.

I received a being willing to awaken.

The gate of Abhirati opens not to perfection already attained but to sincere aspiration continually renewed."

Then the Blessed One turned to the present assembly and declared:

"Remember this always.

No lineage grants entrance.

No secret knowledge purchases admission.

No hidden power compels awakening.

The meeting with a Buddha occurs wherever humility encounters compassion and wisdom dispels self-clinging."

He concluded with these verses:

Bow not
Because another
Stands higher.

Bow because
All beings
May awaken.

Approach not
Seeking privilege.

Approach
Seeking truth.

Then every step
Becomes an audience

With the Tathāgata.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas deepened their resolve to cultivate humility above prestige.

The devas scattered jeweled blossoms throughout Abhirati.

The nāga kings bowed until their crowns touched the radiant ground.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rejoiced with immeasurable gratitude before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the whole assembly praised the inconceivable Dharma.

Book V — The Vision of Abhirati

Chapter 38

The Teaching of Mirror-Like Wisdom

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the account of the Meeting with Akṣobhya had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed deeply and remained kneeling before the World-Honored One.

With reverence he asked:

"Blessed One, throughout this sacred realm I have seen lakes that reflect without distortion, mirrors that reveal attachment rather than appearance, and practitioners who respond to praise and blame with equal composure. The very land seems to embody a profound principle.

What is this Mirror-Like Wisdom of which the sages speak?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, Mirror-Like Wisdom is not merely a metaphor, nor is it a substance hidden within the mind.

It is the unobstructed knowing that reflects phenomena exactly as they arise, without grasping, aversion, projection, or confusion.

The mirror rejects nothing.

The mirror possesses nothing.

The mirror is unstained by what appears within it.

So too the awakened mind."

The assembly became perfectly still.

Then the Blessed One raised a polished sapphire disc before those gathered.

Every face in the assembly appeared upon its surface.

Bodhisattvas, devas, nāgas, birds, insects, flowers, mountains, and clouds were all reflected together.

When a breeze disturbed the air, the reflections shifted naturally.

When the breeze ceased, clarity returned.

The Buddha asked:

"Has the mirror favored one image above another?"

The assembly replied:

"No, World-Honored One."

"Has it become angry when a wrathful face appeared?"

"No, World-Honored One."

"Has it become proud when reflecting a Buddha?"

"No, World-Honored One."

The Blessed One smiled.

"So too should the practitioner cultivate awareness."

Then he recited:

The mirror
Does not chase beauty.

The mirror
Does not resist ugliness.

Because it clings
To neither,

It reveals both
Faithfully.

The vision shifted.

Sāgaramati accompanied the Buddha to a tranquil lake whose waters were smoother than polished crystal.

Akṣobhya dropped a single blue lotus petal upon the surface.

Concentric ripples spread outward.

The reflections of stars shimmered but were not destroyed.

The Blessed One said:

"Thoughts are like these ripples.

The ordinary mind mistakes movement for corruption.

The wise know that movement itself need not obscure clarity."

Sāgaramati contemplated these words in silence.

Then he asked:

"Blessed One, if thoughts continue arising, how can wisdom remain undisturbed?"

The Buddha replied:

"By recognizing thoughts as dependently arisen rather than identifying with them.

A bird flying across the sky leaves no lasting wound upon space.

Likewise a thought leaves no stain upon awareness unless grasped."

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

Clouds cross
The open sky.

The sky
Does not pursue them.

Memories cross
The open mind.

Wisdom
Does not imprison them.

Let appearances arise.

Let appearances cease.

The mirror remains.

The vision expanded.

The assembly beheld practitioners from countless realms seated beside mirrors fashioned from crystal, bronze, still water, polished obsidian, and even pools of melted snow.

Some frowned continually at their reflections.

Some admired themselves endlessly.

Some attempted to wipe away images with frantic effort.

Only a few quietly cleaned the surface and then forgot the mirror entirely.

The Blessed One declared:

"Many attempt to change appearances before understanding perception.

Mirror-Like Wisdom begins by polishing attention."

At that moment a young novice approached carrying a tarnished mirror blackened by smoke.

He asked:

"Master, should I break it and obtain another?"

An elderly nun answered:

"No.

Remove the soot."

Patiently the novice polished the surface until it reflected perfectly.

The Blessed One praised the lesson.

"The nature of awareness is not improved by replacing it.

Only obscurations require removal."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, what are these obscurations?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"They are greed that says, 'May only pleasant things appear.'

Hatred that says, 'May unpleasant things vanish.'

Delusion that says, 'The reflection is the object itself.'

Pride that says, 'My reflection matters most.'

Fear that says, 'The mirror will break if I look honestly.'

Remove these, and wisdom shines naturally."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then the Buddha manifested another symbolic vision.

Countless beings entered a great Hall of Mirrors.

Each mirror displayed not physical features but the emotional state of the observer.

The angry saw flames.

The generous saw open hands.

The jealous saw locked gates.

The compassionate saw blooming lotuses.

Many attempted to polish the mirrors from the outside.

Nothing changed.

Only when they calmed their own minds did the reflections transform.

The Blessed One explained:

"The world often appears according to the condition of the perceiver.

Therefore cultivate the perceiver."

He then recited:

Blame not
The mountain

Because the echo
Returns harshly.

Examine first
The voice
You projected.

So too
With the world.

Next the Blessed One led Sāgaramati through a grove where artisans crafted mirrors of extraordinary beauty.

One apprentice boasted:

"My mirror is the clearest in all Abhirati."

His teacher quietly breathed upon it.

The sudden mist obscured everything.

Then the teacher wiped it clean with a simple cloth.

He said:

"Do not boast of clarity.

Maintain it."

Sāgaramati bowed in understanding.

For he recognized that awakening requires continual mindfulness rather than complacency.

Nearby sat an elderly gardener tending blue lotuses.

Without being asked, she remarked:

"When the lake is stirred by storms, wait.

Do not strike the water in anger hoping to make it still."

The Blessed One smiled.

"Patience is among the finest polishing cloths."

The vision then revealed a king from another world who came seeking instruction.

He asked Akṣobhya:

"How may I govern my kingdom perfectly?"

The Buddha handed him a mirror.

The king looked puzzled.

Days later he returned.

"I see only myself."

Akṣobhya replied:

"Then begin there."

The king entered retreat.

Months afterward he emerged gentler, more patient, and less attached to praise.

His realm prospered not because the mirror contained magic but because honest self-examination had transformed conduct.

The Blessed One declared:

"The greatest reform begins within."

Then Sāgaramati inquired:

"World-Honored One, can Mirror-Like Wisdom coexist with compassion?

If the mirror merely reflects, does it not remain indifferent?"

The Buddha answered:

"A mirror reveals a traveler stumbling toward a precipice.

Compassion extends a hand.

Mirror-Like Wisdom perceives clearly.

Great Compassion responds appropriately.

Separated, each is incomplete.

United, they are the activity of Buddhahood."

The assembly rejoiced greatly.

Then Akṣobhya manifested one final symbolic vision.

The entire cosmos appeared as a single boundless mirror.

Worlds arose like fleeting reflections.

Civilizations blossomed and vanished.

Stars ignited and cooled.

Beings were born, aged, died, and were reborn.

Nothing remained fixed.

Yet throughout every transformation the mirror itself neither increased nor diminished.

The Blessed One explained:

"Suchness is unstained by arising and ceasing.

To realize this directly is to approach Mirror-Like Wisdom."

Sāgaramati then bowed until his forehead touched the sapphire ground.

He said:

"Blessed One, I now understand why domination fails.

One who grasps reflections mistakes them for reality.

One who knows the mirror no longer clings."

Akṣobhya nodded gently.

"You understand the beginning.

Continue polishing."

Finally, the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Reflect all things.

Grasp none.

Welcome all beings.

Exclude none.

See clearly.

Respond compassionately.

Thus the mirror
Never clouds,

The lake
Never loses depth,

And the bodhisattva
Walks through saṃsāra

Without carrying
Even a single stain.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained deeper realization of non-attachment and unobstructed awareness.

The devas scattered sapphire and silver blossoms over the assembly.

The nāga kings gazed into the still lakes of Abhirati and contemplated their own minds.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rejoiced with immeasurable gratitude, and all present praised the inconceivable Mirror-Like Wisdom of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book V — The Vision of Abhirati

Chapter 39

The Nature of Fear and Emptiness

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on Mirror-Like Wisdom had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his seat, bowed respectfully, and addressed the World-Honored One:

"Blessed One, throughout the history of Raktaloka and the Human Realm I have witnessed beings ruled by fear. Kingdoms have been founded upon it, wealth accumulated through it, conflicts prolonged by it, and delusions strengthened because of it.

Yet you have repeatedly declared that fear is empty.

How may something so powerful be empty, and how may something empty exert such influence?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, this question penetrates deeply into the Dharma.

Hear well.

Emptiness does not mean nonexistence.

It means the absence of independent, permanent, and self-sufficient essence.

Fear arises.

Fear conditions action.

Fear has consequences.

Yet fear possesses no enduring core.

It depends upon causes.

When those causes cease, fear likewise ceases."

The assembly listened with undivided attention.

Then the Blessed One manifested a vision.

A traveler walked alone through a forest at twilight.

Upon the path lay a coiled rope.

Mistaking it for a serpent, he fled in terror.

His heart raced.

His breathing quickened.

He abandoned provisions and stumbled through thorns.

Only at sunrise did he discover the harmless rope.

The Buddha asked:

"Was the fear real?"

The assembly answered:

"Yes, Blessed One."

"Was the serpent real?"

"No, Blessed One."

The Tathāgata nodded.

"So too beings suffer greatly because of misconceptions that nevertheless produce genuine consequences."

Then he recited:

The dream tiger
Cannot bite.

Yet the sleeper
May awaken sweating.

The imagined insult
Has no substance.

Yet resentment
May endure for years.

Know the emptiness
Of appearances,

And compassion
Will replace panic.

The vision changed.

Sāgaramati saw multitudes gathered in a marketplace where rumors spread that famine was imminent.

People hurried to purchase grain.

Seeing empty shelves, others panicked.

Prices rose.

Neighbors distrusted one another.

Within days the rumor itself created the scarcity it had predicted.

The Blessed One explained:

"Fear often conditions the very circumstances it dreads.

Thus ignorance weaves its own net."

Nearby lived an elderly baker named Maitrigupta.

Rather than hoard flour, he announced:

"My ovens remain open to all.

Those with coin may pay.

Those without may eat nonetheless."

His calm example spread through the district.

Merchants resumed ordinary trade.

Trust slowly returned.

The feared catastrophe diminished.

The Buddha praised him.

"One fearless act rooted in compassion may dissolve the panic of thousands."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, if fear is empty, should practitioners ignore danger?"

Akṣobhya replied:

"Certainly not.

Wisdom distinguishes caution from fear.

Seeing a cliff, the wise avoid falling.

Seeing fire, they protect children.

Seeing illness, they seek medicine.

Fear imagines suffering before it arrives and clings after it departs.

Wisdom responds appropriately to present conditions."

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

Cross not
The broken bridge.

But neither
Spend your life

Imagining bridges
That never existed.

Walk carefully.

Walk compassionately.

Walk freely.

The vision expanded.

The assembly beheld physicians treating contagious disease.

Some worked skillfully without panic.

Others, overwhelmed by anxiety, spread confusion among patients.

Both possessed equal knowledge.

Only their relationship to fear differed.

The Buddha declared:

"Knowledge guided by fear narrows.

Knowledge guided by compassion widens."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

An immense palace stood upon foundations of mist.

Its walls consisted of whispers.

Its pillars were woven from expectations.

Its roof rested upon memories.

Countless beings hurried inside seeking permanent safety.

Yet each room dissolved when grasped.

One child laughed and stepped outside.

The entire palace vanished.

The Blessed One explained:

"So too with imagined securities built upon attachment.

Examine them carefully, and many disappear."

At that moment Sāgaramati reflected upon Raktaloka.

He remembered how generations had organized institutions around preserving themselves from uncertainty.

The more security they accumulated, the more anxiously they defended it.

He bowed and asked:

"Blessed One, why does possession often increase fear?"

The Buddha answered:

"Because attachment generates vulnerability.

One who clings to reputation fears disgrace.

One who clings to wealth fears poverty.

One who clings to power fears obscurity.

One who clings to identity fears change.

Release the grasp, and fear loses nourishment."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then Akṣobhya recited:

The open hand
Cannot be robbed.

The empty bowl
Cannot overflow.

The unattached heart
Cannot be imprisoned

By tomorrow's shadow.

The vision shifted once more.

A renowned philosopher entered Abhirati carrying a heavy chest.

The guardians welcomed him warmly.

They asked only one question:

"What do you carry?"

He answered proudly:

"My conclusions."

When invited to enter, he found the gates too narrow for the chest.

He struggled all day without success.

At sunset a small novice passed by carrying nothing.

The child entered effortlessly.

Seeing this, the philosopher reluctantly opened his chest.

Inside were labels:

"My certainty."

"My superiority."

"My grievances."

"My fears."

One by one he set them aside.

With each burden removed the chest grew lighter.

At last he entered Abhirati carrying only an empty box.

The novice smiled and said:

"Now there is room to learn."

The Blessed One praised this parable.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, can emptiness itself become frightening?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"To the grasping mind, yes.

The ego imagines emptiness as annihilation because it cannot conceive freedom without possession.

But the wise understand emptiness as limitless openness.

The empty cup receives tea.

The empty field receives rain.

The empty heart receives boundless compassion."

The Buddha then spoke in verse:

Fear says,
'I shall lose myself.'

Wisdom replies,
'What self can be found?'

Fear says,
'Nothing remains.'

Compassion replies,
'Then everything may be embraced.'

The vision deepened.

Sāgaramati saw an endless ocean stretching beyond sight.

Many travelers clung desperately to wooden rafts though already standing in shallow water.

Terrified of drowning, they refused to let go.

An old woman quietly set down her raft and discovered firm ground beneath her feet.

She called gently to the others.

Some believed.

Some did not.

The Blessed One explained:

"Many fears persist because beings never test them through direct experience."

Then there appeared a bodhisattva physician who traveled among villages troubled by anxiety.

He carried no medicine chest.

Instead he asked each sufferer:

"What exactly are you afraid of?"

Some answered honestly.

Others discovered they could not say.

Merely articulating the fear caused it to diminish.

The physician bowed and continued onward.

The Blessed One smiled.

"Clear seeing itself possesses healing power."

Finally Akṣobhya addressed Sāgaramati directly:

"The civilizations of Raktaloka sought to master fear through control.

Some in the Human Realm sought to master fear through domination.

Others sought to profit from fear.

Yet all these methods multiplied the very condition they opposed.

Only insight into emptiness truly liberates.

When fear is seen as dependently arisen, compassion naturally replaces panic.

Mirror-Like Wisdom reflects danger accurately without inventing monsters.

The bodhisattva therefore neither denies fear nor obeys it.

He understands it."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Fear is a wave.

Do not build
A palace upon it.

Fear is a cloud.

Do not mistake it
For the sky.

Fear is conditioned.

See conditions clearly.

Then emptiness
Reveals freedom,

And freedom
Flowers naturally

As compassion
For all beings.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained profound realization concerning the emptiness of fear and the fearless compassion born from wisdom.

The devas scattered sapphire blossoms over the lakes of Abhirati.

The nāga kings renewed vows never to manipulate fear but always to relieve it.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed deeply before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book V — The Vision of Abhirati

Chapter 40

The Prophecy of Redemption

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the inconceivable Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Nature of Fear and Emptiness had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, prostrated before the Blessed One, and asked:

"World-Honored One, if even those who have wandered long in delusion retain the seed of awakening, what future awaits the peoples of Raktaloka? Shall they remain forever imprisoned by pride, fear, and mistaken views, or will they one day return to the Dharma?"

The Blessed One gazed across the sapphire lakes, whose still waters reflected countless worlds.

After a long silence he spoke:

"Sāgaramati, no being is excluded from the reach of compassion.

No world is beyond the possibility of transformation.

No stream of karma, however turbulent, is forever cut off from the ocean of awakening.

Hear now the prophecy born not from fate but from the inexhaustible power of causes and conditions."

The assembly grew utterly still.

Then the Blessed One emitted a radiant beam of mirror-like light that extended through immeasurable kalpas.

Within that light appeared the future histories of innumerable realms.

The assembly saw civilizations rise, flourish, decline, and disappear.

They saw forests become deserts and deserts bloom into gardens.

They saw oceans withdraw and mountains sink beneath waves.

Stars ignited and faded.

Galaxies drifted apart.

Yet through every transformation, one constant remained:

Whenever even a single being generated genuine bodhicitta, the direction of history subtly changed.

The Blessed One declared:

"Never underestimate one wholesome intention.

Its consequences cannot be measured."

Then he recited:

One seed
Splits stone.

One candle
Challenges night.

One vow
Offered sincerely

Echoes farther

Than armies
Marching for ages.

The vision turned toward Raktaloka.

The once-great Crystal Kingdoms stood cracked and weathered.

Ancient canals had become dry valleys.

The inland seas receded.

Their magnificent libraries were buried beneath layers of windblown crimson sand.

Yet deep below the surface, forgotten chambers remained intact.

Within them sat small communities of contemplatives who had preserved neither wealth nor weapons but only ethical precepts, meditation manuals, and songs of compassion.

They awaited no conqueror.

They awaited only the ripening of conditions.

Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, why were these humble communities preserved while mighty empires vanished?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Because generosity survives where greed consumes itself.

Because humility bends where pride breaks.

Because Dharma transmitted through conduct endures longer than Dharma engraved in stone."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then another vision appeared.

Among the descendants of the Red Nāgas there arose children who questioned inherited assumptions.

When taught contempt, they asked,

"Why should we despise those who suffer?"

When instructed to fear strangers, they replied,

"Have we spoken with them?"

When offered privilege at another's expense, they hesitated.

These simple questions unsettled ancient habits more effectively than violence.

The Blessed One smiled.

"The future often begins with curiosity joined to compassion."

He then spoke in verse:

Ask gently.

Listen deeply.

Examine patiently.

For the smallest question
Asked honestly

May loosen chains
Forged over centuries.

The vision broadened further.

The Human Realm likewise passed through periods of confusion.

Some societies glorified domination.

Others surrendered to despair.

Still others became captivated by illusion and forgot the cultivation of virtue.

Yet in every generation hidden bodhisattvas quietly appeared.

Teachers encouraged critical reflection.

Parents raised children without hatred.

Farmers shared seed during famine.

Judges admitted mistakes.

Monastics welcomed strangers.

Artists depicted impermanence.

Physicians treated enemies.

Their names rarely entered chronicles.

Nevertheless, the karmic field gradually changed.

The Blessed One declared:

"History remembers kings.

The Dharma remembers kindness."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, shall there come a final battle between wisdom and ignorance?"

The Tathāgata shook his head gently.

"Ignorance possesses no independent army.

Its soldiers are misunderstandings.

Its fortresses are habits.

Its banners are conceit.

When understanding dawns, these forces dissolve without requiring annihilation.

Therefore the greatest victory is awakening."

The Blessed One then recited:

Strike not
The shadow.

Light the lamp.

Curse not
The night.

Open the window.

The sun
Needs no ally.

The vision shifted once again.

The assembly beheld a symbolic mountain covered by snow.

From beneath the ice emerged a tiny spring.

At first it appeared insignificant.

Travelers scarcely noticed it.

But the stream widened into a river, the river nourished forests, the forests brought rain, and the rain revived distant plains.

Akṣobhya explained:

"So too does bodhicitta spread.

Its beginnings appear small.

Its consequences transform worlds."

Then Sāgaramati perceived a future gathering unlike any before.

Representatives of humans, devas, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, and countless other beings assembled without hierarchy.

No throne stood above the others.

Instead a single empty lotus occupied the center.

Each participant interpreted the empty seat differently.

Some saw wisdom.

Some compassion.

Some emptiness.

Some dependent origination.

The Blessed One explained:

"The lotus remains empty because awakening cannot be monopolized.

The Dharma belongs to no tribe, species, nation, lineage, or planet.

It is available wherever conditions permit realization."

The assembly rejoiced greatly.

At that time one novice asked:

"Blessed One, if redemption is possible, will all beings inevitably attain Buddhahood?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"The potential for awakening pervades all sentient beings.

Yet causes and conditions unfold according to karma and effort.

Compassion never abandons anyone.

The Path remains open.

Therefore labor tirelessly for the liberation of all without measuring who is near or far."

Then the Blessed One manifested one final symbolic vision.

The sky appeared filled with innumerable mirrors drifting like clouds.

Some were polished.

Some covered with dust.

Some cracked.

Some newly forged.

As rain began to fall, every mirror gradually became clean.

The rain consisted of generosity, ethical conduct, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom.

No mirror rejected it.

No mirror owned it.

When the rain ceased, every surface reflected the same moon.

The Buddha explained:

"So too beings differ in obscuration but not in their capacity to reveal Suchness."

Sāgaramati bowed deeply.

"Blessed One, then even those who once cultivated fear and domination may one day become protectors of life?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Indeed.

The fiercest hatred may become the deepest compassion when transformed.

The proudest ruler may become the humblest servant.

The one who once sowed division may later heal nations.

Never imprison a being within its past karma.

Encourage the causes of future awakening."

Then the Tathāgata proclaimed his prophecy:

"In ages yet to come, many descendants of the Red Nāgas shall renounce domination and seek the Bodhisattva Path.

They shall confess former errors, protect vulnerable beings, preserve wisdom rather than secrecy, and dedicate

immeasurable merit toward the liberation of the Human Realm and all worlds.

Their redemption shall not erase history but transform its meaning.

Those who once harvested fear shall cultivate courage.

Those who once manipulated dreams shall encourage mindfulness.

Those who once concealed truth shall delight in transparency.

Thus Mirror-Like Wisdom will shine where ignorance once prevailed."

The devas showered celestial flowers upon the assembly.

The nāga kings wept tears that became blue lotuses upon the lakes of Abhirati.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati joined his palms and silently renewed his vow to labor for the awakening of every sentient being without exception.

Finally, the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

No chain
Is stronger
Than compassion.

No prison
Outlasts wisdom.

No darkness
Can forbid
The coming dawn.

Therefore despair not
For any being.

The lotus root
Sleeps beneath mud,

Awaiting only
The season

To bloom.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated boundless faith in the universal capacity for awakening.

The entire assembly praised the inconceivable compassion and mirror-like wisdom of Akṣobhya Tathāgata.

Book VI — The Destruction of Mars

Chapter 41

The Refusal of the Teaching

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the prophecy concerning the future redemption of the Red Nāgas had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed respectfully before the World-Honored One and asked:

"Blessed One, if the Dharma was proclaimed and the path of compassion made known, why did so many among the peoples of Raktaloka fail to accept it? By what causes did they refuse the liberating teaching?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, no Buddha compels belief.

No bodhisattva forces awakening.

The Dharma is offered like rain falling equally upon mountains, valleys, forests, and fields.

Some seeds germinate immediately.

Some remain dormant for many seasons.

Some fall upon barren stone.

The rain is not at fault."

The assembly listened with deep attention.

Then the Blessed One emitted a sapphire ray, revealing the declining ages of Raktaloka after Sāgaramati's first vision of Abhirati.

Word spread quietly among contemplatives that a sage had encountered a Buddha-field beyond ordinary perception.

Some rejoiced.

Some became curious.

Others grew suspicious.

Still others dismissed the reports entirely.

A council of philosophers gathered within one of the Crystal Kingdoms.

The eldest among them addressed the assembly:

"We have mastered architecture, astronomy, governance, mathematics, and the subtle workings of the mind.

What need have we for teachings concerning emptiness and compassion?"

A younger scholar replied:

"Because despite our accomplishments, suffering remains."

Many ignored him.

The Blessed One declared:

"Pride often mistakes accumulated information for liberating wisdom."

Then he spoke these verses:

The library
May fill a mountain.

Yet one page
Of practiced compassion

Outweighs
Unread volumes.

The tallest tower
Cannot see

What humility
Perceives.

The vision shifted.

Messengers sympathetic to Sāgaramati traveled through villages carrying simple teachings.

They encouraged generosity.

They taught meditation upon breathing.

They urged reconciliation among feuding families.

Many common people welcomed these practices.

Harvest festivals became occasions for sharing.

Old disputes ended.

Communities flourished.

Yet among certain elites another attitude arose.

"If ordinary people cultivate contentment," they whispered, "they may become difficult to control through promises of status or threats of disgrace."

Thus some leaders opposed the teaching, not because it was false, but because it diminished attachment.

The Blessed One explained:

"Attachment fears its own extinction."

Then another vision appeared.

A wealthy administrator invited Sāgaramati to debate before a large audience.

Confident in his rhetorical skill, the official declared:

"Power creates order.

Competition creates excellence.

Fear preserves discipline.

Compassion weakens resolve."

Sāgaramati answered calmly:

"Discipline rooted in fear survives only while fear remains.

Discipline rooted in understanding becomes self-sustaining.

Which foundation appears stronger to you?"

The audience fell silent.

Some reconsidered their assumptions.

Others applauded the administrator out of habit.

The debate ended without a declared victor.

Yet years later many remembered only Sāgaramati's question.

The Blessed One smiled.

"Questions often travel farther than conclusions."

He then recited:

Win not
Merely the argument.

Win
The opportunity

For another mind
To awaken.

The vision broadened.

Within monasteries, too, disagreement appeared.

Certain practitioners embraced the path of Mirror-Like Wisdom wholeheartedly.

Others became fascinated by meditative attainments, visions, and psychic experiences.

One monk boasted that he could perceive distant events through concentration.

An elderly nun asked gently:

"And have you perceived your own pride?"

The monk lowered his head.

The assembly in Abhirati laughed softly.

The Blessed One praised the nun.

"Even spiritual accomplishment becomes an obstacle when appropriated by ego."

Meanwhile among the descendants of the Red Nāgas, some scholars reinterpreted Sāgaramati's teachings.

They accepted ethical conduct but rejected emptiness.

They admired compassion while preserving superiority.

They praised meditation yet continued seeking domination.

The Dharma became ornament rather than transformation.

The Buddha declared:

"One may decorate chains with jewels and still remain bound."

Then the Tathāgata spoke in verse:

Wear the robe.

Chant the sutra.

Build the temple.

Yet unless
The grasping mind softens,

The prison
Acquires only
Finer walls.

At that time there lived a simple mason named Śāntikara.

Unable to read, he nevertheless attended every public discourse.

When asked what philosophy he followed, he answered:

"I repair cracked foundations before painting walls."

People assumed he referred to architecture.

Only later did they understand he spoke of the heart.

His apprentices became renowned not merely for skilled construction but for honesty in trade and kindness toward laborers.

The Blessed One praised him before the assembly.

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly saw a magnificent banquet prepared in a great hall.

Every table overflowed with nourishing food.

Yet many guests sat starving because they argued endlessly about the shape of the bowls.

Some insisted the round bowls were superior.

Others praised square bowls.

Some measured spoons.

Some criticized decoration.

Only a few quietly ate.

The Buddha explained:

"So too beings dispute methods while neglecting practice.

The purpose of the Dharma is liberation, not endless contention."

Sāgaramati then asked:

"Blessed One, why do beings refuse teachings that could relieve suffering?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Because suffering becomes familiar.

Identity forms around wounds.

Communities organize around shared fears.

Institutions preserve old grievances.

To relinquish delusion may feel like relinquishing oneself.

Therefore compassion must accompany truth."

The vision shifted one final time.

Sāgaramati stood before a gathering of students beneath a red evening sky.

Instead of delivering a lecture, he placed an empty bowl before them.

Hours passed.

Finally one impatient youth exclaimed:

"Master, why do you say nothing?"

Sāgaramati replied:

"I wished to discover whether you sought wisdom or entertainment."

Several students departed.

A handful remained.

Those few eventually became the most diligent practitioners.

The Blessed One smiled.

"The Dharma attracts those prepared to practice, not merely to admire."

Then Akṣobhya addressed the present assembly:

"The refusal of the teaching did not arise because the Dharma lacked clarity.

It arose because countless beings preferred certainty over inquiry, prestige over humility, control over compassion, and habit over transformation.

Yet even refusal became a condition through which future acceptance might ripen.

Therefore the bodhisattva never despairs."

Finally, the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Offer the lamp.

Force no eye
To open.

Plant the seed.

Command not
The season.

Teach with patience.

Serve with kindness.

For today's refusal

May become

Tomorrow's awakening.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated greater patience toward those not yet ready to receive the Dharma.

The devas showered sapphire blossoms over the jeweled fields of Abhirati.

The nāga kings reflected upon former attachments and renewed their vows of humility.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed deeply before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable teaching.

Book VI — The Destruction of Mars

Chapter 42

The Drying of the Seas

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly gathered in the stainless Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching on the Refusal of the Teaching had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, bowed respectfully, and addressed the World-Honored One:

"Blessed One, after many among the peoples of Raktaloka turned away from the path of wisdom, what became of their world? The ancient chronicles speak of seas that vanished and fertile plains that became deserts. How should these events be understood according to the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, all conditioned realms are impermanent.

Mountains rise and are worn away.

Rivers alter their courses.

Forests become grasslands.

Oceans expand and retreat.

Worlds themselves arise, abide for a time, decline, and pass away according to innumerable causes and conditions.

Therefore do not imagine that any land, however beautiful, escapes change."

The assembly inclined their heads in agreement.

Then the Blessed One emitted a ray of sapphire light, and within it appeared Raktaloka during an age of gradual transformation.

The great inland seas that had once nourished countless settlements no longer reached their former shores.

Harbors stood abandoned.

Docks extended into empty plains.

Fishing villages became caravan stations.

Children played where ships had once sailed.

The people wondered among themselves:

"Has the world betrayed us?"

But an old contemplative answered:

"The world has promised only change."

The Blessed One declared:

"Impermanence is not punishment.

It is the nature of conditioned existence."

Then he recited:

Do not curse
The autumn leaf

For leaving the branch.

Do not curse
The setting sun

For yielding to night.

So too the sea
Withdraws

According to causes,

Not malice.

The vision shifted.

Some communities responded wisely.

Seeing the waters recede, they adapted with cooperation.

Canals were deepened.

Reservoirs constructed.

Crops changed according to new conditions.

Travelers shared knowledge between regions.

Monasteries opened their granaries during difficult seasons.

The suffering remained real, yet compassion lessened its burden.

Elsewhere, however, different reactions emerged.

Certain rulers refused to accept change.

They ordered maps redrawn to show old coastlines.

Officials punished those who reported declining water levels.

Engineers whose measurements contradicted political expectations lost their positions.

The land grew drier while proclamations insisted prosperity had never been greater.

The Blessed One turned toward Sāgaramati.

"Attachment often resists reality by denying it."

Then another vision appeared.

A young surveyor named Sumati carefully measured the retreating shoreline each month.

When summoned before the royal court, he presented his findings honestly.

The chief minister demanded:

"Can your measurements not be adjusted to encourage confidence among the people?"

Sumati answered:

"A false map guides no traveler safely."

For his integrity he was dismissed from office.

Years later, when emergency planning became necessary, communities that had preserved his records survived with far less hardship.

The Blessed One praised him.

"Truthfulness is among the highest forms of generosity."

Then he spoke in verse:

The cracked vessel
Leaks whether noticed
Or ignored.

The wise repair it.

The foolish
Paint flowers
Across the fracture.

The vision broadened.

The drying seas altered migration routes.

Birds nested elsewhere.

Fish populations shifted.

Merchant caravans replaced maritime trade.

Some mourned these changes endlessly.

Others adapted with creativity.

A widow whose family had long depended upon fishing began cultivating drought-resistant orchards.

When asked how she endured the loss, she replied:

"I cannot command the waters to return.

But I may still plant kindness."

Her orchards eventually fed thousands.

The Buddha smiled.

"Thus resilience rooted in compassion becomes merit."

Sāgaramati then asked:

"Blessed One, did these transformations arise through moral failure?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Do not confuse natural impermanence with karmic retribution.

Karma shapes experience, intention, and rebirth.

Material conditions arise through vast networks of causes beyond simplistic judgment.

The drying of the seas became an occasion revealing character.

Some responded with generosity.

Some with greed.

Some with wisdom.

Some with denial.

The event itself compelled none of these."

The assembly rejoiced in this clarification.

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

An immense blue bowl stood upon a table.

Drop by drop, water evaporated beneath the warmth of the sun.

Many observers panicked only when the bowl became nearly empty.

One child quietly placed another vessel beneath morning dew and collected enough moisture to nourish nearby flowers.

The Blessed One explained:

"Those who cultivate mindfulness perceive gradual change before crisis arrives."

He then recited:

Attend
To the first crack.

Attend
To the first weed.

Attend
To the first harsh word.

Small neglects

Become great sorrows.

The vision shifted once more.

Communities across Raktaloka gathered in annual ceremonies praying for the return of the vanished waters.

Among them walked an elderly nun carrying no offerings except a wooden bucket.

People mocked her simplicity.

She filled the bucket from a remaining spring and spent the day watering newly planted trees.

Asked why she neglected the grand ritual, she replied:

"I pray with my hands."

Generations later those trees sheltered entire settlements.

The Blessed One praised her before the assembly.

"The Dharma flowers through action."

Then Sāgaramati reflected deeply.

He observed that the shrinking seas mirrored the decline of attachment itself.

As waters withdrew, hidden foundations appeared.

Ancient paths emerged.

Forgotten ruins resurfaced.

Likewise, when craving diminished, previously concealed truths became visible.

The Blessed One perceived his thought and nodded.

"You understand correctly.

Outer transformations often serve as skillful means revealing inner realities."

At that moment the vision showed children exploring newly exposed caverns beneath the former seabed.

There they discovered inscriptions left by ancestors warning future generations:

"Treasure compassion above abundance.

The deepest reservoir is the generous heart."

The children carried these words back to their villages.

Many adults laughed.

Some quietly changed their lives.

The assembly rejoiced.

Finally Akṣobhya addressed Sāgaramati directly:

"The drying of the seas symbolized more than environmental change.

It revealed the impermanence upon which all worldly security rests.

Those who trusted only favorable conditions despaired.

Those who cultivated wisdom adapted.

Those who cultivated compassion transformed adversity into shared practice.

Thus the receding waters became another teacher."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

When the river
Changes course,

Build another bridge.

When the harvest
Fails,

Share the remaining grain.

When the sea
Withdraws,

Discover
The well within.

For all outer waters
Rise and fall,

But the spring
Of bodhicitta

Never runs dry.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained deeper realization of impermanence and skillful adaptation.

The devas showered sapphire blossoms over Abhirati.

The nāga kings contemplated the changing landscapes of countless worlds without attachment.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VI — The Destruction of Mars

Chapter 43

The Collapse of the Crystal Kingdoms

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Drying of the Seas had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, bowed before the World-Honored One, and respectfully inquired:

"Blessed One, the chronicles of my people speak often of the Crystal Kingdoms, whose towers glittered beneath the crimson sky and whose halls were said to preserve the accumulated wisdom of many generations. Yet nothing conditioned endures forever.

How did those splendid kingdoms come to collapse?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, understand first that no kingdom is destroyed in a single day.

Its outward walls often stand long after its inward foundations have weakened.

Likewise, the decline of virtue precedes the decline of monuments.

Attend carefully."

The assembly grew silent.

Then the Blessed One emitted a ray of sapphire light that revealed the Crystal Kingdoms in the final centuries of their prosperity.

Their towers still shone in the sunlight.

Their observatories tracked the stars with remarkable precision.

Libraries contained innumerable scrolls.

Markets overflowed with goods gathered from distant regions.

Travelers from many lands admired the brilliance of their architecture.

Yet beneath this appearance subtle cracks had already formed.

Young scholars sought acclaim more eagerly than understanding.

Officials prized efficiency above compassion.

Merchants celebrated accumulation while neglecting generosity.

Temples expanded in size while shrinking in humility.

The Blessed One declared:

"When appearances improve while wisdom declines, collapse approaches though few perceive it."

Then he spoke in verse:

The polished roof
May conceal

Rotting beams.

The smiling face
May conceal

A troubled heart.

Repair first
The hidden foundation.

The vision shifted.

There existed in one Crystal Kingdom an annual Festival of Illumination.

Originally the people gathered to meditate upon the radiance of wisdom overcoming ignorance.

Families reconciled with estranged relatives.

Debts were forgiven.

Public granaries distributed food freely.

Children floated lanterns upon canals while chanting verses on compassion.

Over many generations, however, the festival changed.

Competition replaced gratitude.

Households vied to display the brightest lanterns.

Merchants sold extravagant decorations.

Judges awarded prizes for spectacle.

The original purpose was nearly forgotten.

Only an elderly monk named Dharmaprabha still extinguished his lantern before sitting silently in contemplation.

When asked why he alone sat in darkness during the celebration, he answered:

"I seek the light that requires no oil."

The Blessed One praised him.

"Thus even amid decline the Dharma quietly endures."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, did no one recognize the danger?"

Akṣobhya replied:

"Some recognized it.

Few wished to hear it.

Warnings against attachment often offend those profiting from attachment."

Another vision appeared.

A respected engineer carefully examined the great crystal bridges connecting the kingdoms.

He discovered minute fractures invisible to casual observation.

Reporting his findings to the council, he urged repairs.

The ministers objected.

"Announcing structural weakness will alarm the public."

The engineer answered:

"The bridge does not consult opinion before collapsing."

Repairs were postponed.

Years later a heavily traveled span failed during a seasonal procession.

Many suffered unnecessarily.

The Blessed One turned toward the assembly.

"Truth delayed is compassion delayed."

Then he recited:

The physician
Who fears
Delivering diagnosis

Delivers instead
Greater illness.

Speak truth
With kindness,

And repair
May yet begin.

The vision broadened.

As environmental conditions changed and the inland seas receded, the Crystal Kingdoms increasingly depended upon elaborate technologies and centralized administration.

At first these adaptations relieved hardship.

Reservoirs were built.

Irrigation channels expanded.

Archives coordinated resources across distant provinces.

Yet complexity itself generated vulnerability.

When one system failed, many others followed.

Communities that had forgotten local self-sufficiency struggled greatly.

Meanwhile humble villages practicing cooperation adapted more easily.

The Blessed One explained:

"Skill is admirable.

Dependence without resilience invites suffering."

At that time there lived a village craftswoman named Ratnamālā.

She taught every apprentice not merely one trade but several.

Potters learned farming.

Farmers learned carpentry.

Builders learned healing herbs.

Asked why she refused specialization alone, she answered:

"When storms arrive, versatility becomes generosity."

Her community weathered later hardships with remarkable unity.

The Blessed One praised her before the assembly.

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly beheld an immense crystal palace suspended above the earth.

Its walls sparkled brilliantly.

Visitors admired their reflections upon every surface.

Yet beneath the palace stood only a single slender pillar.

No one looked downward.

Children finally noticed a crack running through its base.

When they pointed it out, adults replied:

"Do not spoil the celebration."

Eventually the pillar failed.

The palace shattered into countless transparent fragments that covered the valley like ice.

The Buddha explained:

"The pillar symbolizes ethical conduct.

Without śīla, knowledge, wealth, and beauty lose stable support."

Sāgaramati bowed deeply.

He asked:

"Blessed One, were the crystal structures themselves blameworthy?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"No.

Architecture possesses no greed.

Libraries harbor no conceit.

Technology contains no hatred.

Only minds misuse conditions.

The same crystal may become a monastery window or the ornament of vanity.

The same road may carry physicians or armies.

Objects reflect intention."

The assembly rejoiced in this clarification.

Then the Blessed One revealed another scene.

As public institutions weakened, ordinary neighbors quietly sustained one another.

Blacksmiths repaired tools without charge.

Teachers continued instructing children after schools closed.

Monastics copied manuscripts before archives deteriorated.

Musicians preserved songs of loving-kindness.

Fishermen shared dwindling catches.

Their names vanished from official records, yet their conduct preserved the moral fabric of society.

The Blessed One declared:

"When kingdoms collapse, kindness often remains standing."

He then recited:

The tower falls.

The helping hand
Remains.

The treasury empties.

The generous heart
Remains.

The banner fades.

The vow
Remains.

The vision shifted once more.

Sāgaramati wandered through the abandoned Hall of Mirrors where statesmen had once debated the future of civilization.

Dust covered the polished floors.

Birds nested among cracked ceilings.

On the central dais stood no throne, only a weathered inscription carved long before:

"Reflect clearly, and no empire is required."

Seeing these forgotten words, Sāgaramati wept.

He realized that his ancestors had always possessed the seeds of wisdom but too often neglected to cultivate them.

The Blessed One comforted him.

"Do not mourn only what has been lost.

Honor also what may yet be restored."

Finally Akṣobhya addressed the entire assembly:

"The collapse of the Crystal Kingdoms was not merely the breaking of buildings.

It was the revelation that even the finest civilizations remain impermanent.

Those who anchored hope solely in institutions despaired.

Those who anchored hope in bodhicitta continued serving others amid ruins.

Thus the true kingdom proved not to be constructed from crystal but from awakened conduct."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Raise splendid halls,

But raise compassion higher.

Preserve libraries,

But preserve humility first.

Build bridges of stone,

But build bridges
Of understanding before them.

For crystal shatters.

Empires fade.

Even mountains wear away.

Yet one act
Of selfless wisdom

Reflects through kalpas

Like sunlight
In an unbroken mirror.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained deeper realization of the inseparability of ethical conduct and wisdom.

The devas scattered sapphire blossoms over Abhirati.

The nāga kings contemplated the ruins of former greatness without regret or pride.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the whole assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VI — The Destruction of Mars

Chapter 44

The War of the Seven Clans

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Collapse of the Crystal Kingdoms had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, bowed before the Blessed One, and asked:

"World-Honored One, after the weakening of the Crystal Kingdoms, the ancient records speak of a terrible conflict remembered as the War of the Seven Clans. Did such strife truly arise, and what lesson does the Dharma draw from it?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, conflict among beings has arisen throughout beginningless saṃsāra.

When wisdom declines and attachment increases, communities that once cooperated may come to regard one another as rivals.

The War of the Seven Clans is remembered not because violence is glorious, but because it demonstrates the immense suffering born from greed, hatred, and delusion."

The assembly inclined their heads.

Then the Blessed One emitted a sapphire radiance that revealed the final centuries of Raktaloka.

The old centralized kingdoms had weakened.

Local communities increasingly governed themselves.

Among them were seven great cultural confederations, each preserving different customs, dialects, crafts, and spiritual practices.

Originally they exchanged knowledge freely.

Pilgrims traveled between their cities.

Scholars copied one another's manuscripts.

Musicians borrowed melodies across regions.

Marriages united distant families.

The diversity enriched the whole.

The Blessed One declared:

"Difference need not become division.

Variety need not become hostility."

Then he recited:

Seven notes
Compose one melody.

Seven colors
Adorn one rainbow.

Seven rivers
Reach one sea.

So too may
Many peoples

Share one compassion.

The vision shifted.

Years of environmental hardship strained cooperation.

Harvests became uncertain.

Trade routes lengthened.

Rumors multiplied.

Some leaders proposed mutual aid.

Others argued that prosperity required guarding resources for one's own people alone.

Meetings that once ended in friendship now concluded with suspicion.

Maps grew crowded with boundaries.

Words such as *ours* and *theirs* acquired increasing emotional weight.

At that time there arose a humble caravan master named Śāntirakṣita.

He continued transporting medicine and grain across clan boundaries despite criticism.

When questioned, he answered:

"Hunger recognizes no banner."

Many mocked him.

Yet villages spared by his generosity later preserved peace when others descended into conflict.

The Blessed One praised him before the assembly.

Then another vision appeared.

Representatives of the Seven Clans gathered for a final council.

The eldest among them spoke:

"Our ancestors flourished through exchange.

Let us renew their covenant."

A younger delegate replied:

"Trust is dangerous."

Another added:

"Strength alone guarantees survival."

A fourth whispered:

"If our neighbors weaken, our own position improves."

The debate continued for many days.

No agreement emerged.

Finally the council dispersed without reconciliation.

The Buddha turned toward Sāgaramati.

"The failure occurred not because compromise was impossible, but because attachment proved stronger than patience."

Then the Blessed One spoke in verse:

The closed gate
Protects a house.

But if never opened,

The family
Starves within.

Guard wisely.

Fear not endlessly.

The vision broadened.

Minor disputes escalated into armed confrontations.

At first the conflicts remained limited.

Bridges were seized.

Trade caravans intercepted.

Reservoirs contested.

Yet grief produced resentment, resentment invited retaliation, and retaliation justified further violence.

Children inherited injuries they had never personally suffered.

Poets glorified sacrifice while forgetting reconciliation.

Even neutral communities felt compelled to choose sides.

The Blessed One declared:

"This is the wheel of dependent origination operating through collective delusion.

One unexamined act conditions another until entire generations forget the first cause."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, which clan bore greatest responsibility?"

Akṣobhya replied:

"The question itself arises from attachment.

Each side believed itself justified.

Each remembered its own losses more vividly than those of others.

Each narrated history from the center of its own suffering.

The Dharma does not excuse harmful conduct, but neither does it simplify complex causes into one permanent villain."

The assembly rejoiced at this teaching.

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

Seven travelers crossed a desert carrying fragments of a map.

Each possessed one portion only.

Believing the others mistaken, they refused cooperation.

Each wandered separately and became lost.

Years later a child gathered the discarded pieces and discovered that together they formed a complete route to an oasis.

The Blessed One explained:

"Partial truth defended with pride often obscures greater understanding."

He then recited:

Hold conviction
Firmly enough
To act.

Hold it lightly enough
To learn.

The wise hand
Closes for work,

But opens
For wisdom.

The vision shifted once more.

During the darkest period of the war, monasteries across Raktaloka opened their gates to refugees regardless of clan.

Monks cared for wounded soldiers from opposing sides in neighboring rooms.

Nuns distributed food without asking allegiance.

Children orphaned by violence were raised together.

Some rulers accused the monasteries of disloyalty.

The abbess Vimala replied:

"Our loyalty is to suffering beings."

Many lives were preserved through such impartial compassion.

The Blessed One praised these hidden bodhisattvas.

Then another remarkable event occurred.

Two generals from opposing armies met accidentally while seeking water during a dust storm.

Unable to recognize one another in the swirling sands, they cooperated to uncover an ancient well.

Only after drinking did they learn each other's identities.

Rather than draw weapons, they laughed at the absurdity.

For several hours they shared stories of family, grief, and hope.

Though unable to halt the war entirely, both later ordered unnecessary assaults canceled.

Thousands survived because two thirsty beings drank from the same spring.

The Buddha smiled.

"Shared humanity often appears where ideology temporarily falls silent."

Sāgaramati reflected deeply.

He asked:

"Blessed One, could the war have been prevented?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"Certainly.

Had generosity prevailed over scarcity, dialogue over suspicion, patience over pride, and compassion over vengeance, different causes would have yielded different results.

No conflict is inevitable merely because conditions become difficult."

Then the Blessed One manifested a profound symbolic vision.

The assembly saw seven magnificent mirrors arranged in a circle.

Each reflected only six others, never itself.

For ages the mirrors accused one another of distortion.

Finally a small bird landed before them.

Its reflection appeared in every surface simultaneously.

The mirrors realized that each had always shown only part of the whole.

The Blessed One explained:

"So too every community sees reality through conditioned perspectives.

Humility allows perspectives to complement rather than destroy one another."

At last the war exhausted itself.

Not because one clan achieved permanent victory, but because all had suffered immeasurable loss.

Fields lay neglected.

Libraries burned.

Roads crumbled.

Families mourned.

Survivors looked upon the devastation and asked:

"What exactly have we won?"

An old woman gathering medicinal herbs answered quietly:

"An opportunity to choose differently."

The Blessed One praised her wisdom.

Finally Akṣobhya addressed Sāgaramati and the assembly:

"The War of the Seven Clans should never be remembered to glorify conquest or to perpetuate resentment.

Its true purpose as sacred history is to reveal the catastrophic consequences of collective ignorance and the immeasurable value of reconciliation.

Remember always that enemies arise dependent upon conditions.

Transform the conditions, and the category itself may dissolve."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Seven clans.

One sky.

Seven languages.

One wind.

Seven histories.

One impermanence.

Therefore raise not
Walls of memory,

But bridges
Of compassion.

For victory
Won through hatred

Perishes.

But reconciliation

Echoes through kalpas.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated the perfection of patience and the aspiration to reconcile divided communities wherever they might be reborn.

The devas showered sapphire blossoms upon the assembly.

The nāga kings renewed vows never again to let pride divide them.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire gathering rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VI — The Destruction of Mars

Chapter 45

The Fall Beneath the Sands

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly gathered in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the War of the Seven Clans had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, bowed respectfully before the World-Honored One, and asked:

"Blessed One, after conflict had exhausted the strength of the Seven Clans, the old chronicles speak of cities that disappeared beneath crimson sands. Entire libraries, monasteries, observatories, and markets are said to have vanished from sight. What lesson should future generations draw from this mysterious falling away?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, the sands themselves are blameless.

Wind follows conditions.

Stone erodes according to causes.

Cities are buried because all compounded things are subject to change.

Yet there is another burial more subtle than that of architecture: when wisdom is forgotten beneath layers of attachment.

Hear this teaching well."

The assembly became silent.

Then the Blessed One emitted a sapphire ray, and within its radiance appeared the final generations of the once-great cities of Raktaloka.

The canals had grown shallow.

The towers still stood, but many windows were empty.

Markets opened only on certain days.

The laughter of children echoed through abandoned plazas once crowded with scholars.

Great libraries remained, yet few came to study.

The people looked upon these changes with sorrow.

Some blamed neighboring clans.

Some blamed the heavens.

Some blamed fate.

Very few examined their own minds.

The Blessed One declared:

"The first city to be buried is the city of mindfulness."

Then he spoke these verses:

When memory
Becomes pride,

Dust gathers.

When knowledge
Becomes ornament,

Dust gathers.

When compassion
Is postponed,

Dust gathers.

Sweep the heart
Before the street.

The vision shifted.

Across the red plains, seasonal winds strengthened.

They carried fine particles that accumulated against walls and foundations.

Each storm seemed insignificant.

After one storm, families simply cleared their doorways.

After another, merchants swept the roads.

After another, monks cleaned temple steps.

Yet year after year the deposits increased.

An old groundskeeper remarked:

"No avalanche announces itself with its first grain."

Few listened.

The Blessed One smiled gently.

"So too with the accumulation of unexamined habits."

Then another vision appeared.

In the city of Vajrakūṭa stood the greatest archive of the Seven Clans.

Its chief librarian, an elderly nun named Jñānadīpā, foresaw that the building itself might not endure.

Rather than despair, she organized students to copy essential teachings onto portable scrolls and clay tablets.

When younger scholars protested,

"Surely these walls will stand forever,"

she answered,

"No building promises permanence.

Only practice preserves wisdom."

Years later, when the archive collapsed beneath drifting sand, those copies carried by humble travelers became the seed from which later communities rebuilt learning.

The Blessed One praised her before the assembly.

"The one who entrusts truth to living conduct rather than stone monuments preserves it most securely."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, why did so many cling to outward forms while neglecting inward realization?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Because visible structures reassure the grasping mind.

It imagines that if the temple remains, wisdom remains.

If the palace remains, order remains.

If the statue remains, devotion remains.

Yet when compassion departs, empty buildings cannot save a civilization."

The assembly rejoiced in this teaching.

Then the Blessed One recited:

Better one hut
Filled with kindness

Than a thousand halls
Echoing conceit.

Better one practiced verse

Than libraries
Never lived.

The vision broadened.

A prosperous merchant family, seeing the approach of another great sandstorm, hurried to bury chests of jewels beneath their courtyard.

Nearby, a physician spent the same hours teaching apprentices how to prepare life-saving medicines from local plants.

When the storm passed, the merchant's mansion had vanished beneath dunes.

The physician's clinic had likewise disappeared.

Yet the apprentices carried healing knowledge wherever they traveled.

The jewels remained hidden.

The medicine spread across generations.

The Buddha declared:

"What is shared survives.

What is hoarded often vanishes unseen."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly saw an immense hourglass suspended in the sky.

Instead of sand falling downward, memories descended.

Ancient victories.

Old resentments.

Forgotten songs.

Broken promises.

Acts of generosity.

Words of forgiveness.

As the memories accumulated, they buried a magnificent city until only the highest tower remained visible.

Finally a child climbed the tower and planted a blue lotus upon its summit.

At once the buried city became transparent, revealing that wisdom had never been destroyed, only concealed.

The Blessed One explained:

"The sands symbolize ignorance layered over Buddha-Nature.

Excavate through mindfulness rather than violence."

Then Sāgaramati reflected:

"Blessed One, many later generations may search beneath deserts hoping to recover the treasures of the ancients."

The Tathāgata replied:

"They may indeed uncover artifacts, inscriptions, and forgotten halls.

Such discoveries have value.

But greater still is uncovering the generosity buried beneath resentment, the patience buried beneath anger, and the clarity buried beneath confusion.

The deepest archaeology is the excavation of the heart."

The devas rejoiced.

Then the vision shifted once more.

A group of refugees fled a city gradually disappearing beneath advancing dunes.

Unable to carry all possessions, they argued over what should be saved.

Some chose gold.

Some chose ceremonial garments.

Some chose records of noble ancestry.

An elderly monk quietly carried only a begging bowl, a copy of the precepts, and seeds wrapped in cloth.

When asked why, he replied:

"With these three things one may nourish body, conduct, and future harvests."

Years later his descendants established thriving settlements wherever they wandered.

The Blessed One praised his discernment.

He then spoke in verse:

Carry lightly.

Travel far.

Preserve
What cannot easily
Be replaced.

The vision deepened.

Sāgaramati himself wandered through streets half-covered by crimson dunes.

Wind moved through empty windows like quiet chanting.

He entered the abandoned Hall of Astronomers where cracked crystal instruments still pointed faithfully toward the heavens.

Upon one wall remained an inscription almost erased by time:

> "Measure the stars if you wish, but first measure
> the grasping mind."

Sāgaramati knelt and wept.

He understood that his ancestors had repeatedly encountered the Dharma in many forms but too often admired it without embodying it.

The Blessed One placed a compassionate hand upon his shoulder.

"No effort toward wisdom is wasted.

Even forgotten inscriptions may awaken future generations."

Finally Akṣobhya revealed one last symbolic vision.

The entire red world disappeared beneath gentle waves of luminous sand until nothing remained visible.

Then the wind ceased.

One by one, blue lotus flowers emerged from beneath the dunes without human assistance.

Their roots had remained alive all along.

The Buddha explained:

"So too with the Dharma.

Periods of obscurity may conceal it.

Ages of confusion may bury it.

But where wholesome roots remain, awakening blossoms again when conditions ripen."

Turning to Sāgaramati and the whole assembly, the Blessed One declared:

"The Fall Beneath the Sands should not be remembered merely as the loss of cities.

It should be remembered as a lesson in impermanence.

Buildings disappear.

Institutions decline.

Languages fade.

Yet every act of compassion plants seeds beyond the reach of wind and time.

Therefore build not only with stone but with virtue.

For virtue alone accompanies beings through birth and death."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Let the towers fall.

Let the roads vanish.

Let the dunes
Cover forgotten walls.

But guard well

The seeds
Of loving-kindness,

The springs
Of wisdom,

And the vow

To liberate all beings.

For no desert
Can bury

The heart
Awakened to Suchness.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained deeper realization of impermanence and the indestructibility of wholesome roots.

The devas showered sapphire blossoms over Abhirati.

The nāga kings contemplated the buried cities of old without attachment.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VI — The Destruction of Mars

Chapter 46

The Hidden Cities

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the stainless Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Fall Beneath the Sands had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, bowed deeply before the World-Honored One, and asked:

"Blessed One, after many settlements disappeared beneath the crimson dunes, stories spread among later generations concerning hidden cities preserved beneath the earth. Some imagined vaults of immeasurable treasure. Others dreamed of secret rulers awaiting the proper hour to emerge.

How should these accounts be understood according to the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, hidden cities may indeed exist, concealed by mountains, forests, deserts, or the passage of time. Such things are not impossible within the conditioned world.

Yet the greatest hidden cities are found within the mind itself.

There dwell forgotten virtues, neglected aspirations, abandoned vows, and unexamined fears.

Whoever uncovers these with wisdom discovers treasures surpassing jewels."

The assembly listened with joyful attention.

Then the Blessed One emitted a sapphire ray, revealing the years following the burial of many settlements beneath the red sands.

The people who survived scattered across valleys, caves, canyons, and remaining waterways.

Some founded new villages upon the surface.

Others sought shelter in ancient caverns where temperatures remained cool and springs still flowed.

These subterranean communities did not hide out of hatred for the world.

They hid to preserve life, learning, and compassion during difficult times.

The Blessed One declared:

"There is concealment born of fear and concealment born of wisdom.

Discern the difference."

Then he recited:

The seed
Sleeps beneath soil

Not from cowardice,

But until
The season ripens.

The hermit
Seeks solitude

Not to escape beings,

But to return
With compassion renewed.

The vision shifted.

Among the refugees was an elderly architect named Vajramitra.

Rather than constructing palaces, he designed underground halls that admitted light through polished shafts reaching the surface.

Water flowed through carefully carved channels.

Gardens flourished beneath crystal ceilings.

Meditation chambers were built beside reservoirs so that practitioners could contemplate reflections undisturbed by wind.

When praised for his ingenuity, Vajramitra answered:

"A shelter is successful when its occupants remember the sky."

The Blessed One smiled.

"Thus wise design avoids becoming attachment."

Within one hidden city lived artisans, physicians, scribes, farmers, monks, and children together.

No profession claimed superiority.

Each morning the community gathered in silent meditation before beginning ordinary labor.

Afterward they recited a simple vow:

> "May whatever we preserve be preserved for the benefit of all beings, not merely ourselves."

Generations passed.

Though materially poor, they remained rich in cooperation.

The Buddha praised them before the assembly.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, why did later storytellers imagine these hidden cities as centers of secret dominion?"

Akṣobhya replied:

"Because the grasping mind often projects its own ambitions onto what it cannot see.

One person imagines hidden wealth.

Another imagines hidden armies.

Another imagines hidden conspiracies.

Rarely does one imagine hidden communities quietly practicing generosity."

The assembly laughed softly.

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

What lies unseen

Reveals more
About the seeker

Than the hidden thing.

The greedy imagine treasure.

The fearful imagine enemies.

The compassionate imagine
Fellow travelers.

The vision broadened.

A caravan crossing the desert discovered the entrance to an underground monastery.

The travelers expected fortifications.

Instead they found monks repairing sandals, tending orchards, teaching children, and copying worn manuscripts.

The abbot welcomed them warmly.

One merchant whispered:

"Where are the secret weapons?"

The abbot held up a broom.

"This has defeated much ignorance."

Another asked:

"Where is the hidden treasury?"

The abbot pointed toward a room where elderly women taught orphans to read.

"There."

The merchants departed thoughtful and changed.

The Blessed One declared:

"Many search for marvelous powers while overlooking ordinary virtue."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly saw seven subterranean chambers beneath a mountain.

The first contained gold.

The second silver.

The third precious gems.

The fourth rare medicines.

The fifth ancient books.

The sixth sacred art.

The seventh appeared empty.

Most visitors lingered in the first six.

Only one patient novice entered the final chamber.

There he found an old woman seated in meditation.

She opened her eyes and smiled.

"The empty room contains the greatest treasure," she said.

The novice asked,

"What treasure is that?"

She answered,

"Freedom from craving for the previous six."

The Blessed One praised this teaching.

Then he recited:

Treasure
Cannot satisfy
Greed.

Knowledge
Cannot satisfy
Pride.

Only wisdom
Satisfied by nothing

Opens the gate
To liberation.

The vision shifted again.

Some hidden communities gradually forgot why their ancestors had sought refuge.

Isolation became identity.

Caution hardened into suspicion.

Hospitality diminished.

One young novice questioned these developments.

"If we preserve wisdom by fearing strangers," he asked, "what exactly are we preserving?"

His teacher remained silent for a long while before replying:

"You have reminded us."

Thereafter the gates were reopened to peaceful travelers.

The community flourished through renewed exchange.

The Blessed One explained:

"Protective measures become harmful when they outlive their purpose."

Sāgaramati then asked:

"World-Honored One, should practitioners seek hidden places?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"When conditions favor retreat, retreat may support practice.

When conditions call for service, service becomes retreat.

The Pure Land is not measured by isolation but by the presence of bodhicitta.

One may dwell alone in a cave while nourishing resentment.

Another may labor in a crowded marketplace while abiding in profound samādhi."

The devas rejoiced.

Then another vision appeared.

A child wandered accidentally into a forgotten tunnel beneath the dunes.

There she discovered walls covered not with royal genealogies or military victories but with painted hands of many colors overlapping one another.

An inscription beneath them read:

> "No hand built this refuge alone."

The child copied the image onto cloth and carried it throughout later settlements.

The symbol became associated with cooperation rather than conquest.

The Blessed One praised the unknown artists.

Then the Tathāgata manifested one final symbolic vision.

The assembly beheld an immense city hidden beneath transparent crystal.

From above it seemed invisible.

Yet every act of kindness performed on the surface caused one lamp below to ignite.

Every generous gift lit another.

Every reconciliation another.

Eventually the hidden city shone brighter than the stars.

The Buddha explained:

"This city symbolizes the store of merit accumulated through wholesome action.

Though unseen by ordinary eyes, it accompanies beings across lifetimes.

No thief steals it.

No empire taxes it.

No desert buries it."

Turning toward Sāgaramati and the assembly, Akṣobhya declared:

"Therefore understand the true Hidden City.

It is the awakened potential concealed beneath habits of greed and fear.

It is the Buddha-Nature obscured but never destroyed.

Whoever excavates it through ethics, meditation, and wisdom uncovers inexhaustible riches."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Seek not first

The buried palace.

Seek
The buried compassion.

Search not only

The forgotten tunnel.

Search
The forgotten vow.

For beneath
The sands of ignorance

Lies the city

No wind
Can cover,

Whose gates
Open inward,

And whose foundation

Is bodhicitta itself.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained deeper confidence in the hidden potential for awakening present within all sentient beings.

The devas scattered sapphire blossoms throughout Abhirati.

The nāga kings reflected upon the inner refuge that no catastrophe could destroy.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VI — The Destruction of Mars

Chapter 47

The Long Exile

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Hidden Cities had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, bowed respectfully before the World-Honored One, and asked:

"Blessed One, after the decline of the Crystal Kingdoms and the burial of many settlements beneath the sands, the surviving peoples became scattered across distant regions. Some chronicles call this period the Long Exile.

How should this exile be understood according to the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, exile takes many forms.

One may leave a homeland while preserving wisdom.

One may remain in the birthplace yet wander endlessly through delusion.

The greatest exile is estrangement from one's own Buddha-Nature.

The greatest return is awakening."

The assembly listened with minds settled like still lakes.

Then the Blessed One emitted a ray of sapphire light revealing the survivors of Raktaloka after generations of hardship.

Families departed the old cities carrying little.

Some traveled through deserts.

Some crossed mountains.

Some descended into hidden valleys.

Some followed shrinking rivers.

Others established temporary camps that became villages over time.

No single destination united them.

Yet many shared the memory of a world that no longer existed.

The Blessed One declared:

"Impermanence transforms every homeland.

The wise therefore cultivate refuge in the Dharma."

Then he recited:

Carry not
Only your ancestors' stones.

Carry
Their compassion.

Preserve not
Only their language.

Preserve
Their generosity.

Thus exile
Becomes pilgrimage.

The vision shifted.

Among the refugees walked an elderly schoolteacher named Prajñākara.

Unable to save his library, he memorized poems, ethical precepts, and histories during the journey.

Each evening around the campfire he taught children by recitation.

When asked why he smiled despite losing everything, he answered:

"Books carried in the mind require no wagon."

His students eventually spread across many settlements, preserving wisdom long after written copies had perished.

The Blessed One praised him before the assembly.

"Knowledge shared freely travels farther than monuments."

Then another vision appeared.

Some refugees became consumed by nostalgia.

They recreated old ceremonies exactly as remembered, refusing adaptation even when circumstances had changed.

Others abandoned every tradition, believing the past itself responsible for suffering.

Between these extremes walked a quiet nun named Śāntimatī.

She preserved ethical conduct, meditation, and compassion while allowing customs of dress, architecture, and governance to evolve.

Asked how she distinguished essentials from accidents, she replied:

"If abandoning a practice increases suffering, preserve it.

If preserving it increases suffering, examine it.

If compassion flourishes either way, cling to neither."

The Blessed One smiled.

"Thus the Middle Way appears in unexpected places."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, why do beings cling so tightly to vanished worlds?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Because memory often edits sorrow into sweetness.

The mind polishes yesterday while overlooking today's opportunity for awakening.

Gratitude honors the past.

Attachment attempts to live there."

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

Remember
The flowering tree.

But plant
Another.

Honor
The vanished teacher.

But become
One yourself.

The vision broadened.

Generations passed.

Children born during the Long Exile knew the ancient cities only through stories.

Some imagined impossible splendors.

Others doubted the cities had ever existed.

Arguments arose.

One faction insisted every detail of the old accounts be preserved literally.

Another rejected all tradition as legend.

An old caravan guide listened patiently before drawing a map in the sand.

He erased portions with his sleeve.

Then he said:

"Whether the road once curved left or right matters less than whether it still leads travelers home."

The Buddha praised his wisdom.

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly beheld a flock of migratory birds crossing a vast desert.

Young birds repeatedly asked,

"When shall we arrive?"

The oldest replied,

"We have already arrived at every place where we fly together."

The Blessed One explained:

"The community practicing compassion carries its homeland within."

Sāgaramati reflected deeply.

He asked:

"World-Honored One, can exile itself become beneficial?"

The Tathāgata answered:

"Certainly.

Many attachments loosen when familiar conditions disappear.

Status fades.

Property changes hands.

Reputation becomes unknown.

The practitioner may then discover qualities independent of circumstance.

Thus adversity often becomes a hidden teacher."

The devas rejoiced.

Then the vision shifted again.

A former minister, stripped of office by political upheaval, wandered anonymously among farming villages.

For the first time he harvested grain beside laborers whose names history would never record.

Ashamed of his former arrogance, he apologized repeatedly.

The villagers simply handed him another basket and welcomed his help.

Years later he confessed:

"I lost authority but discovered humility.

The exchange was favorable."

The Blessed One smiled gently.

"Many exiles return wealthier in virtue."

Then the Tathāgata recited:

Lose the palace.

Keep integrity.

Lose the title.

Keep kindness.

Lose the road.

Keep the vow.

No exile
Can steal

What has become
Character.

The vision expanded to encompass the Human Realm as well.

Across many lands and eras, refugees, pilgrims, merchants, monks, and wanderers carried teachings from one culture to another.

A single copied verse crossed mountains.

A physician shared medicinal herbs with distant strangers.

An artisan taught unfamiliar techniques.

Children learned songs in foreign languages.

Thus suffering unexpectedly spread wisdom.

The Blessed One declared:

"Dependent origination weaves even displacement into opportunity."

Then another remarkable event occurred.

During a fierce sandstorm, refugees from rival clans sought shelter in the same cave.

Unable to leave for seven days, they shared food, repaired one another's clothing, and told stories of families left behind.

By the time the storm ended, many realized that grief had been more universal than enmity.

Several feuds ended permanently.

The Buddha praised this transformation.

"Sometimes compassion enters through the doorway necessity opens."

Finally Akṣobhya manifested one last symbolic vision.

The assembly saw a traveler carrying an ornate cage.

Inside fluttered a single blue bird.

Everywhere he went he declared,

"I must protect this precious creature."

Years passed.

The bird sang less and less.

At last an old child—appearing both ancient and young—approached and asked,

"Have you considered opening the door?"

The traveler hesitated, then complied.

The bird circled overhead before returning voluntarily to rest upon his shoulder.

The child smiled.

"What is freely chosen remains more faithfully than what is imprisoned."

The Blessed One explained:

"So too with wisdom.

It cannot be preserved by confinement alone.

It flourishes through generous transmission."

Turning toward Sāgaramati and the assembly, Akṣobhya declared:

"The Long Exile should not be remembered merely as geographic displacement.

It is the condition shared by all beings wandering through saṃsāra, forgetting their immeasurable capacity for awakening.

Every life offers another opportunity to begin the return journey.

The map is ethics.

The provisions are compassion.

The companions are the saṅgha.

The destination is the realization that one was never separate from Suchness."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Though you wander

Across deserts,
Oceans,
And stars,

Forget not

The path within.

Though every city
Become dust,

Though every banner
Fade,

Carry this:

A mind
Resolved upon awakening

Never travels
Alone.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated great perseverance and confidence amid changing conditions.

The devas showered sapphire blossoms over Abhirati.

The nāga kings reflected upon their own long wanderings through saṃsāra and renewed their vows to guide all beings toward liberation.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the whole assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VI — The Destruction of Mars

Chapter 48

The Lament of the Red World

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly gathered in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Long Exile had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, placed his palms together, and bowed deeply before the World-Honored One.

With a voice touched by compassion, he asked:

"Blessed One, having witnessed the decline of my ancestral world—the drying of its seas, the collapse of its kingdoms, the scattering of its peoples, and the burial of its cities—my heart becomes heavy.

Is it proper to grieve for a world that has passed away?

And if so, how should such grief be transformed according to the Dharma?"

The Blessed One gazed across the mirror-like waters of Abhirati, where every reflection appeared without distortion.

After a long silence, he answered:

"Sāgaramati, compassion may shed tears, but wisdom does not drown in them.

The bodhisattva does not suppress sorrow.

He understands it.

He allows grief to ripen into resolve.

Thus lament becomes vow."

The assembly listened with profound stillness.

Then the Blessed One emitted a ray of sapphire radiance that illuminated the ancient valleys and deserts of Raktaloka.

The assembly beheld vast plains where seas had once shimmered.

Broken canals wound through empty basins.

Crystal towers lay buried beneath dunes.

Wind sang through abandoned observatories.

In forgotten courtyards, blue flowers bloomed where no gardeners remained.

The Blessed One declared:

"Impermanence has not erased beauty.

It has revealed its preciousness."

Then he spoke in verse:

Weep,
If tears arise.

But let each tear

Water
A seed of compassion.

Mourn,
If the heart trembles.

But let each sigh

Become
A vow to awaken.

The vision shifted.

Sāgaramati wandered alone through the ruins of an ancient city at twilight.

Half-buried statues emerged from the sand.

Collapsed libraries revealed fragments of manuscripts.

A cracked bell, moved by the wind, still sounded faintly across the empty streets.

He knelt before the remains of a meditation hall where generations of practitioners had once gathered.

There he found a single inscription preserved beneath fallen stone:

> "Nothing here was built to last forever.
> Therefore practice today."

Reading these words, Sāgaramati closed his eyes and bowed.

The Blessed One smiled gently.

"Even ruins preach the Dharma."

Then another vision appeared.

Among the scattered survivors lived an elderly singer named Maitrīdevī.

Each evening she composed songs not glorifying lost empires but remembering acts of kindness.

She sang of the physician who treated strangers.

The mason who repaired bridges without payment.

The child who shared water during drought.

The monk who forgave his captors.

When asked why she ignored famous rulers, she replied:

"Empires vanish quickly enough.

Compassion deserves the longer melody."

Generations later, many of her songs survived though the names of kings had faded.

The Blessed One praised her before the assembly.

"The memory of virtue nourishes future bodhicitta."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, should one seek to restore the Red World exactly as it once was?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"No.

The attempt to recreate yesterday often blinds beings to today's conditions.

Honor the past without becoming imprisoned by it.

Plant new forests rather than worship old stumps.

Repair suffering where you stand."

The Blessed One then recited:

Do not ask

For the flower
Already fallen

To return
To its branch.

Plant another tree,

And tend it
With patience.

The vision broadened.

Throughout later ages pilgrims crossed the deserts searching for legendary cities.

Some sought wealth.

Some sought secret technologies.

Some sought proof of ancient greatness.

A wandering nun encountered many of them.

When asked whether she believed the hidden cities existed, she would smile and reply:

"They exist.

But the entrance opens through generosity."

Most travelers walked away confused.

A few remained to ask further questions.

Those few often abandoned their treasure hunts and began serving nearby villages.

The Blessed One declared:

"Thus skillful speech redirects desire toward wisdom."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The entire Red World took the form of a vast lotus at sunset.

Its outer petals had withered.

Some had fallen entirely.

Observers cried out in despair.

But beneath the fading blossom, countless seeds had already formed.

Carried by the wind, they spread across valleys and distant lands.

The lotus itself faded.

Its future multiplied.

The Buddha explained:

"So too civilizations perish while their virtues continue through those who embody them."

The devas rejoiced.

Then the vision shifted once more.

Sāgaramati came upon an old woman quietly sweeping sand from the threshold of a house almost entirely buried.

He asked:

"Why continue cleaning when tomorrow's wind will cover it again?"

Without pausing she answered:

"Because today's traveler still deserves a clear entrance."

Hearing this, Sāgaramati bowed deeply.

The Blessed One praised her.

"Such conduct surpasses monuments."

Then Sāgaramati reflected upon all he had witnessed.

He saw that many who lamented the destruction of cities had neglected neighbors still living beside them.

Others obsessed over preserving artifacts while ignoring hungry children.

At last he understood that attachment can disguise itself even as reverence for history.

The Blessed One confirmed his realization.

"To cherish memory while forgetting present suffering is another subtle form of delusion."

Then Akṣobhya spoke in verse:

Honor
The ancestors

By feeding
The orphan.

Honor
The vanished temple

By practicing
Its teachings.

Honor
The lost world

By reducing
The suffering
Of this one.

The vision deepened further.

The assembly beheld the karmic stream of countless beings formerly born in Raktaloka taking rebirth throughout many realms according to their actions.

Some became humans.

Some devas.

Some nāgas.

Some animals.

Some entered fortunate circumstances.

Others continued wandering through difficult conditions.

Yet in each stream there remained the latent possibility of awakening.

No catastrophe had erased Buddha-Nature.

No planetary decline had extinguished bodhicitta.

The Blessed One declared:

"Worlds perish.

The Dharma continues.

Bodies perish.

The aspiration to liberate all beings may continue across immeasurable kalpas."

Finally Akṣobhya manifested one last symbolic vision.

The deserts of Raktaloka stretched beneath a silent crimson dawn.

Then, from beneath the sands, innumerable blue lotuses emerged simultaneously.

They required no rivers.

They drew nourishment from hidden springs invisible to ordinary sight.

As they blossomed, their petals reflected not the ruined world beneath them but the luminous skies of Abhirati.

The Buddha explained:

"These lotuses symbolize the wholesome roots never entirely lost.

However deep ignorance buries them, conditions may one day call them forth again."

Turning toward Sāgaramati and the whole assembly, the Blessed One proclaimed:

"Therefore let the Lament of the Red World become not a song of despair but a hymn of resolve.

Grieve wisely.

Remember compassionately.

Practice diligently.

Teach patiently.

For every world subject to arising is also subject to passing away.

Only the Dharma rightly realized guides beings beyond sorrow."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Cry,
If compassion moves you.

Smile,
If wisdom steadies you.

Walk onward,
Whether ruins
Or gardens
Surround your feet.

For every fallen city

May become
A monastery
Of memory.

Every buried stone

May become
A lesson
In impermanence.

And every sincere vow

May bloom

Like a blue lotus

From beneath
The red sands
Of saṃsāra.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated profound compassion free from despair.

The devas showered sapphire blossoms over the jeweled fields of Abhirati.

The nāga kings bowed with tears that became radiant pearls upon the lotus lakes.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati prostrated before Akṣobhya Tathāgata and renewed his vow to guide all wandering beings toward awakening.

The entire assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VII — The Hidden Age

Chapter 49

The Shapeshifting Houses

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Lament of the Red World had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, bowed before the World-Honored One, and respectfully asked:

"Blessed One, after the scattering of the peoples of Raktaloka and their long exile, the ancient traditions speak of certain lineages that became known as the Shapeshifting Houses. Many later generations interpreted these accounts literally, imagining secret beings who concealed themselves among other peoples.

How should these stories be understood according to the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, in the Buddhist cosmology of innumerable realms there are devas, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, and many classes of beings possessing extraordinary abilities according to their karmic conditions. Some may appear in forms unfamiliar to ordinary perception, and certain accomplished beings are described in the scriptures as employing skillful manifestations for compassionate purposes.

Yet the most significant transformation is neither physical nor magical.

It is the continual construction and reconstruction of identity itself.

Beings change masks countless times through craving, fear, memory, and circumstance.

Thus every unenlightened person is, in a sense, a shapeshifter."

The assembly rejoiced at these words.

Then the Blessed One emitted a sapphire ray that revealed the generations following the Long Exile.

As communities dispersed across many lands, families adapted in order to survive.

Those once known as scholars became farmers.

Warriors became healers.

Merchants entered monasteries.

Monastics learned engineering.

Ancient clan names faded.

New customs emerged.

Languages blended.

Children inherited mixed traditions and fashioned identities unknown to their ancestors.

The Blessed One declared:

"Conditioned existence itself is continual transformation."

Then he recited:

The infant
Becomes the elder.

The river
Becomes the cloud.

The seed
Becomes the tree.

Why then cling
To one fixed self

Within
A changing world?

The vision shifted.

Among the descendants of the Red Nāgas arose several extended households renowned for adaptability.

They studied languages wherever they traveled.

They adopted local clothing without shame.

They learned neighboring customs respectfully.

They married across former divisions.

Because they moved easily among different communities, others nicknamed them the Shapeshifting Houses.

Suspicious minds later embroidered these stories into legends of secret supernatural disguises.

But their true gift was empathy.

One elder explained to curious children:

"If you understand another's customs without abandoning compassion, you may dwell peacefully almost anywhere."

The Blessed One praised this attitude.

Then another vision appeared.

A young traveler named Sucandra visited seven regions during her lifetime.

In each she learned local songs before teaching her own.

She dressed appropriately for climate and culture.

She greeted elders according to local etiquette.

When asked,

"Who are you really?"

she answered,

"I am the one practicing kindness here."

Her reputation spread widely.

Some accused her of lacking roots.

Others recognized profound flexibility.

The Buddha smiled.

"The bamboo survives storms by bending."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, when does adaptability become deception?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"When outward change conceals selfish intent.

The bodhisattva adapts to relieve suffering.

The deceiver adapts to manipulate.

The same appearance may hide opposite motivations.

Therefore examine intention."

He then spoke in verse:

Wear another robe
If weather requires.

Speak another tongue
If friendship requires.

But never wear
Another conscience.

The vision broadened.

The assembly beheld merchants entering foreign cities.

Some falsely praised local rulers while secretly planning exploitation.

Others sincerely sought mutual prosperity.

To casual observers both behaved similarly.

Yet their karmic trajectories differed greatly.

One accumulated distrust.

The other accumulated merit.

The Blessed One declared:

"Action receives meaning through intention joined with consequence."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

A hall contained a thousand masks crafted from crystal, wood, bronze, silk, and jade.

Visitors eagerly tried them on.

One mask represented authority.

Another scholarship.

Another holiness.

Another wealth.

Another victimhood.

Another rebellion.

People argued fiercely over which mask expressed their true identity.

At last an old nun entered carrying no mask at all.

She looked into a mirror and laughed.

Asked why, she replied:

"The face changes also."

The assembly smiled.

The Blessed One explained:

"Attachment to identity often exceeds attachment to possessions."

Then Sāgaramati reflected:

"Blessed One, are names themselves empty?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"They function conventionally and should not be despised.

Names allow communication.

Roles organize responsibility.

Families preserve memory.

The error lies not in using designations but in mistaking them for permanent essence.

Call the river by any name.

Still it flows."

The devas rejoiced.

Then the vision shifted again.

Within one hidden settlement children played a favorite game.

Each morning they exchanged occupations.

The baker became the judge.

The judge became the shepherd.

The shepherd became the physician.

The physician became the potter.

Afterward they discussed what they had learned.

The exercise cultivated unusual empathy.

As adults they governed with remarkable fairness because each understood the burdens of the others.

The Blessed One praised the teachers who invented the game.

Then he recited:

Walk one day
In another's sandals.

Much anger
Will disappear.

Listen one hour
To another's grief.

Many enemies
Will become neighbors.

The vision deepened.

Certain practitioners misunderstood emptiness and claimed:

"If identity is fluid, ethical conduct is irrelevant."

Seeing this error spread, an elderly monk placed water into seven differently shaped vessels.

Some were round.

Some square.

Some tall.

Some shallow.

He asked his students:

"Has the water become virtuous in one cup and corrupt in another?"

"No," they replied.

He then poured all seven into one basin.

"The forms differ.

The need for purity remains."

The Blessed One praised this demonstration.

"Emptiness liberates responsibility from conceit.

It does not abolish responsibility."

Then another symbolic vision unfolded.

Sāgaramati encountered a magnificent palace whose walls changed color every moment.

Blue became green.

Green became gold.

Gold became crimson.

Travelers continually argued:

"What color is the palace truly?"

A child sitting quietly beneath a nearby tree finally answered:

"It is changing."

The debate ended.

The Buddha smiled.

"So too with conditioned identities."

Finally Akṣobhya addressed Sāgaramati and the assembly:

"The legends of the Shapeshifting Houses preserve a deeper truth.

Beings continually assume identities through karma and conditions.

Across innumerable rebirths one becomes ruler and servant, parent and child, scholar and laborer, deva and animal, wealthy and poor.

Knowing this, the bodhisattva abandons pride and extends compassion impartially.

The highest transformation is not changing one's appearance but transforming greed into generosity, hatred into loving-kindness, delusion into wisdom, and fear into fearless compassion.

This is the true shape-shifting praised by all Buddhas."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Change garments.

Change language.

Change dwelling.

Change occupation.

But above all,

Change
The grasping heart.

For whoever transforms

Self-clinging
Into bodhicitta

Has accomplished
The greatest metamorphosis

In all the worlds.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas attained deeper realization of non-self and skillful adaptation.

The devas scattered sapphire blossoms over the lakes of Abhirati.

The nāga kings rejoiced that their descendants' legends could be understood as teachings on impermanence and compassion rather than domination.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly praised the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VII — The Hidden Age

Chapter 50

The Secret Influence Over Nations

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Shapeshifting Houses had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, bowed before the World-Honored One, and asked:

"Blessed One, throughout later ages many believed that unseen forces secretly guided kingdoms and nations from behind the scenes. Some imagined hidden councils directing rulers. Others feared invisible dynasties manipulating history.

How should such beliefs be understood in accordance with dependent origination and the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, beings often seek a single hidden cause for events that actually arise from innumerable interconnected conditions.

One harvest depends upon rain, soil, seed, labor, insects, sunlight, memory, cooperation, and time.

Likewise, the fortunes of nations arise through the karma of countless beings acting together.

Rarely does one concealed hand move the whole.

Yet subtle influences undeniably exist.

Ideas shape institutions.

Teachers shape students.

Parents shape children.

Customs shape generations.

Thus influence often proves more enduring than force."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then the Blessed One emitted a sapphire ray that revealed many kingdoms across innumerable worlds.

In one realm, a humble schoolmaster patiently taught honesty to village children.

In another, an elderly physician treated enemies and friends alike.

Elsewhere, a monk copied a single manuscript preserving the precepts during an age of turmoil.

Generations later, these seemingly insignificant actions transformed entire societies.

The Buddha declared:

"The quiet deed often echoes farther than the loud proclamation."

Then he recited:

The mountain
Does not hear

The falling snowflake.

Yet snowflake
By snowflake,

The valley changes.

The vision shifted.

A powerful emperor once commanded armies stretching across continents.

His decrees altered borders and trade routes.

Yet within two centuries scarcely anyone remembered his speeches.

Meanwhile, a nameless grandmother who taught her descendants to settle disputes with listening rather than

violence shaped the conduct of hundreds of families across generations.

The Blessed One smiled.

"Consider carefully which influence proved greater."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, why do people so often imagine hidden masters directing history?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Because uncertainty troubles the grasping mind.

A single imagined architect appears easier to comprehend than countless interdependent causes.

The search for one invisible ruler often conceals unwillingness to examine ordinary greed, hatred, and delusion."

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

Blame not first

The hidden chamber.

Examine first

The visible heart.

Many empires
Begin

With one resentment
Repeated.

The vision broadened.

The assembly beheld seven neighboring kingdoms.

Each believed its prosperity depended upon surpassing the others.

Competition intensified.

Merchants hoarded grain.

Officials concealed information.

Border disputes multiplied.

A wandering nun entered every capital carrying only an alms bowl.

She asked each ruler the same question:

"What would happen if your neighbors flourished also?"

Most found the inquiry unsettling.

One young queen answered:

"Then we would all sleep more peacefully."

Inspired by her response, several agreements concerning water sharing and trade were concluded.

Conflict diminished.

The Blessed One praised the nun.

"Questions planted with wisdom reshape nations."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly saw an enormous tapestry suspended across the sky.

Thousands of colored threads crossed one another.

Observers argued endlessly over which single strand held the fabric together.

Finally an apprentice weaver gently pulled one thread.

A large section loosened.

Then another.

Soon it became clear that every strand depended upon countless others.

The Buddha explained:

"So too with societies.

No solitary influence sustains or destroys them.

Interdependence governs all conditioned formations."

The devas rejoiced.

Then the vision shifted again.

Among the descendants of the Red Nāgas there survived small circles devoted to preserving contemplative discipline.

They possessed no armies.

They issued no decrees.

Their influence spread because neighbors admired their conduct.

Travelers observed that disputes ended quickly among them.

Resources were shared fairly.

Children respected elders without fear.

Visitors carried these habits elsewhere.

Without intending conquest, the communities quietly improved surrounding regions.

The Blessed One declared:

"The most beneficial secret influence is exemplary conduct."

Then he recited:

The flower
Commands no bee.

Its fragrance
Simply exists.

So too virtue

Needs no trumpet

To transform
The world.

Sāgaramati then reflected:

"Blessed One, can harmful ideas likewise spread invisibly?"

Akṣobhya nodded.

"Indeed.

Resentment repeated becomes tradition.

Prejudice repeated becomes custom.

Fear repeated becomes policy.

Greed repeated becomes economy.

Delusion repeated becomes ideology.

For this reason practitioners must examine even subtle habits before transmitting them."

The assembly grew solemn.

Then another vision appeared.

A child overheard two elders speaking harshly of distant strangers.

Years later the child repeated the same judgments despite never having met those people.

Another child, hearing words of generosity instead, grew into a physician serving travelers regardless of origin.

The Buddha explained:

"The hidden influence of speech extends beyond immediate hearing."

Then the Tathāgata recited:

Teach carefully.

For walls remember echoes,

And children remember tones

Long after
Words are forgotten.

The vision deepened.

A sage visited seven capitals carrying a polished mirror.

Each ruler expected strategic counsel.

Instead the sage invited them to gaze quietly into the mirror before making decisions.

Some mocked him.

One king accepted the practice.

Over time he delayed judgments until anger subsided.

Executions declined.

Negotiations increased.

Neighboring rulers imitated his restraint.

Peace gradually spread.

The mirror itself possessed no magic.

Mindfulness had become policy.

The Blessed One smiled.

"Mirror-Like Wisdom governing even one heart influences many."

Then another symbolic vision unfolded.

The assembly saw invisible currents flowing beneath the earth like underground rivers.

Some carried kindness.

Some resentment.

Some courage.

Some despair.

Whenever beings acted intentionally, they poured water into one stream or another.

Whole civilizations eventually drank from whichever currents generations had nourished.

The Buddha explained:

"Karma accumulates collectively as well as individually.

Therefore never underestimate ordinary ethical choices."

Finally Akṣobhya turned toward Sāgaramati and declared:

"The true secret influence over nations is not exercised by hidden dynasties or concealed conspiracies but by the quiet transmission of habits, values, stories, and intentions through innumerable minds.

A single act of greed encourages another.

A single act of forgiveness inspires another.

Thus entire cultures gradually incline toward suffering or liberation.

Knowing this, the bodhisattva works patiently, never despising small deeds."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

If you would
Guide a kingdom,

Guide first
Your speech.

If you would
Heal a people,

Heal first
Your intentions.

For unseen seeds

Become visible forests,

And hidden kindness

May nourish worlds

Long after
Its planter
Is forgotten.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated confidence in the transformative power of ethical conduct practiced consistently over time.

The devas scattered sapphire blossoms over the jeweled fields of Abhirati.

The nāga kings renewed their vows to influence the world only through compassion, wisdom, and selfless example.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VII — The Hidden Age

Chapter 51

The Lords of Fear

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the stainless Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Secret Influence Over Nations had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, bowed deeply before the World-Honored One, and respectfully asked:

"Blessed One, in former chapters you spoke of those who discovered how fear could be used to influence others. Some traditions call them the Lords of Fear, as though they possessed dominion over the minds of beings.

Who are these lords, and by what power do they rule?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, hear this carefully.

The Lords of Fear are not a fixed race, hidden species, or eternal order.

Whenever a mind deliberately cultivates fear in order to dominate, exploit, divide, or deceive others, that mind temporarily assumes the role of a Lord of Fear.

Likewise, whenever a mind transforms fear into compassion and wisdom, that lordship immediately ends.

Thus the title describes a condition, not an essence."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then the Blessed One emitted a sapphire ray that illuminated countless worlds.

The assembly beheld rulers frightening subjects to secure obedience.

Merchants exaggerating scarcity to raise prices.

Teachers humiliating students to preserve authority.

Parents manipulating children through shame.

Religious leaders threatening punishment without cultivating understanding.

Even wandering ascetics boasting of secret dangers so that followers would cling to them.

Though differing greatly in appearance, all were sustained by the same habit:

They believed frightened minds easier to control than awakened ones.

The Blessed One declared:

"This is among the oldest delusions in saṃsāra."

Then he recited:

Fear may bend
The knee.

It cannot awaken
The heart.

Compulsion
May silence speech.

It cannot cultivate
Wisdom.

The vision shifted.

In one valley lived a governor named Vajradatta.

He ordered bells rung every evening announcing possible invasions that never occurred.

Citizens remained anxious.

Commerce slowed.

Neighbors distrusted strangers.

The governor interpreted this suspicion as proof that vigilance was necessary.

An elderly monk requested permission to address the town.

Standing beneath the same bell tower, he asked only:

"How many of yesterday's fears actually arrived today?"

Silence spread across the crowd.

The next evening many listened to the bell with calmer minds.

Its power diminished.

The Blessed One praised the monk.

"The examination of fear weakens its dominion."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, why does fear spread so easily?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Because beings mistake urgency for truth.

The frightened mind narrows attention and seeks immediate certainty.

Thus it readily accepts incomplete explanations.

The practitioner widens awareness instead."

He then spoke in verse:

When panic
Demands haste,

Pause.

When certainty
Demands obedience,

Investigate.

When anger
Demands action,

Breathe.

Thus wisdom
Enters.

The vision broadened.

Among the descendants of the Red Nāgas there arose a philosopher called Kṣemapāla.

He gathered students each morning and presented alarming rumors from distant regions.

Instead of reacting, he instructed them first to verify evidence, examine motives, and cultivate loving-kindness toward all involved.

Many impatient pupils left.

Those who remained became renowned judges and mediators.

Their communities prospered because decisions emerged from careful inquiry rather than panic.

The Blessed One smiled.

"Disciplined attention is stronger than agitation."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly saw seven enormous shadows cast across a valley.

People fled in terror.

Some armed themselves.

Some blamed neighbors.

A curious child walked toward the darkness and discovered that each shadow came from a tiny clay figure illuminated by the setting sun.

The child simply waited.

As evening progressed, the shadows disappeared while the figures remained small and harmless.

The Blessed One explained:

"Fear often enlarges conditions beyond their proper scale."

The devas rejoiced.

Then the vision shifted once more.

A prosperous merchant learned that rivals spread rumors predicting economic collapse.

Rather than retaliate, she publicly opened her warehouses and distributed grain at fair prices.

Her transparency dissolved speculation.

Asked why she refused secrecy, she answered:

"Truth requires little guarding."

The Blessed One praised her conduct.

"Generosity interrupts cycles of fear."

Then Sāgaramati reflected:

"Blessed One, can one become a Lord of Fear unintentionally?"

Akṣobhya nodded.

"Indeed.

One may repeat frightening tales carelessly.

One may exaggerate danger to gain attention.

One may cultivate perpetual outrage without intending harm.

Karma responds to intention, but consequences often exceed intention.

Therefore guard speech carefully."

The Blessed One then recited:

A spark
May begin

Without malice.

Yet forests burn
Regardless.

Speak
As one carrying fire

Through dry grass.

The vision deepened.

An anxious scholar visited a forest monastery seeking certainty about every possible future disaster.

The abbot listened patiently before handing him a broom.

For seven days the scholar swept leaves in silence.

On the eighth day he protested:

"I came for prophecy."

The abbot replied:

"You have received practice instead.

One clean path benefits today's travelers more than ten thousand imagined catastrophes."

The scholar gradually understood.

His restless mind settled.

Years later he became known for balanced judgment during crises.

The Blessed One praised this transformation.

Then another symbolic vision unfolded.

The assembly beheld a throne carved entirely from ice.

Whoever sat upon it gained temporary authority by frightening others.

Yet with every command the throne melted slightly.

Its occupants demanded ever greater displays of fear to preserve shrinking influence.

Finally the last ruler plunged harmlessly into cool water.

Children nearby laughed and built floating lotus boats.

The Buddha explained:

"Dominion rooted in fear continually consumes itself."

Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, what then is the antidote?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Mindfulness clarifies.

Wisdom investigates.

Ethical conduct builds trust.

Generosity reduces scarcity.

Loving-kindness dissolves hostility.

Compassion accompanies the frightened.

Mirror-Like Wisdom reflects conditions accurately without magnifying them.

Practiced together, these uproot the causes through which the Lords of Fear arise."

Then the Blessed One manifested one final vision.

Countless beings wandered through a vast hall filled with locked doors.

Above each door appeared a terrifying inscription:

Loss.

Failure.

Death.

Rejection.

Uncertainty.

Most huddled before the entrances, too afraid to proceed.

A bodhisattva quietly opened one door.

Behind it stood only another ordinary path beneath open sky.

Soon others followed.

Door after door yielded not monsters but opportunities for courage, service, and insight.

The Buddha turned to the assembly.

"Much suffering persists because beings fear experiences they have not yet examined.

The bodhisattva enters carefully, compassionately, and with mindfulness."

Finally Akṣobhya addressed Sāgaramati directly:

"Remember this throughout future kalpas.

Do not seek hidden Lords of Fear in distant caverns before recognizing them in subtle habits of your own mind.

Whenever you manipulate through anxiety, they appear.

Whenever you liberate through understanding, they vanish.

Their kingdom is sustained by ignorance.

Its borders dissolve under the light of wisdom."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Fear builds
A fragile throne.

Compassion
Needs none.

Fear gathers
Subjects.

Wisdom
Cultivates friends.

Fear narrows
The world.

Bodhicitta
Makes it vast.

Therefore become
Not a lord
Of frightened minds,

But a servant

Of fearless awakening.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated unshakable resolve never to manipulate others through fear but always to encourage clarity, courage, and compassion.

The devas scattered sapphire blossoms over the lakes of Abhirati.

The nāga kings renewed vows to protect beings from panic and deception.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the whole assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VII — The Hidden Age

Chapter 52

The Merchants of Division

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Lords of Fear had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati rose from his lotus seat, bowed deeply before the World-Honored One, and asked:

"Blessed One, if fear may be cultivated for gain, then surely some profit by deepening the divisions among beings. The old chronicles speak symbolically of the Merchants of Division.

Who are they, and what commerce do they conduct?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, the Merchants of Division are not identified by birth, lineage, nation, or species.

Whenever a being intentionally profits from hostility, inflames resentment for personal advantage, or encourages others to

forget their shared Buddha-Nature, that being temporarily becomes such a merchant.

Likewise, when one reconciles enemies, encourages dialogue, or restores trust, one abandons that trade.

Understand therefore that this title describes conduct, not essence."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then the Blessed One emitted a sapphire ray that illuminated innumerable realms.

The assembly beheld marketplaces, courts, monasteries, schools, and villages.

In each appeared individuals who discovered that conflict could be turned into advantage.

Some sold weapons.

Some sold rumors.

Some sold flattering lies.

Some sold certainty.

Some accumulated prestige by persuading neighbors to despise one another.

Though their occupations differed, their wares shared a common feature:

They exchanged misunderstanding for temporary benefit.

The Blessed One declared:

"Division may enrich the greedy briefly while impoverishing countless beings for generations."

Then he recited:

Coins gained
Through hatred

Carry hidden debts.

Victories won
Through contempt

Accumulate unseen loss.

The vision shifted.

In one prosperous town lived two bakers whose families had worked side by side for decades.

A traveling speculator whispered separately to each:

"The other intends to ruin you."

Neither verified the claim.

Each raised prices.

Each distrusted suppliers.

Soon neighbors chose sides.

The town divided into rival factions.

Bread grew scarce.

The speculator quietly departed with considerable profit.

Years later the bakers reconciled and discovered the deception.

Together they established a public granary where prices remained transparent.

Trust slowly returned.

The Blessed One praised their repentance.

"Shared bread heals many quarrels."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"Blessed One, why are beings so quick to believe stories that separate them?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Because identity often seeks confirmation through contrast.

The untamed mind imagines:

'I know who I am because I know who I reject.'

The awakened mind realizes:

'I understand myself more deeply by understanding others.'

Thus compassion widens identity rather than hardening it."

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

The fence
Protects the garden.

But if built
Across the well,

All thirst together.

The vision broadened.

Among the descendants of the Red Nāgas arose a caravan leader named Maitrin.

He observed increasing hostility between neighboring settlements over access to a spring.

Instead of transporting luxury goods, he filled his wagons with pipes, tools, and engineers.

Together the communities expanded the water system so both received sufficient supply.

When asked how he profited from the arrangement, Maitrin laughed.

"By gaining neighbors instead of rivals."

His descendants prospered for many generations.

The Buddha smiled.

"Cooperation often yields the greatest return."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly saw a bustling marketplace unlike any before.

Stalls displayed invisible merchandise.

One vendor sold suspicion.

Another sold envy.

Another outrage.

Another humiliation.

Customers eagerly exchanged peace of mind for these goods.

At the center sat an elderly woman with a nearly empty table.

Her only offering was a small sign reading:

Listen First.

Few approached.

Yet those who did departed lighter than they had arrived.

The Blessed One explained:

"Patient listening dissolves many false transactions."

The devas rejoiced.

Then the vision shifted again.

A celebrated scholar visited seven kingdoms delivering speeches proving that each neighboring people possessed incurable faults.

Crowds applauded enthusiastically.

Meanwhile his quiet assistant spent evenings introducing musicians, physicians, and teachers from different cultures to one another.

Within decades the assistant's friendships outlasted the scholar's rhetoric.

The Buddha declared:

"Bridges rarely attract applause equal to walls, yet they endure longer."

Then Sāgaramati reflected:

"World-Honored One, may even sincere devotion become merchandise for division?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Indeed.

When one clings to doctrine in order to cultivate superiority rather than liberation, the Dharma itself is misused.

One may recite sutras while nourishing conceit.

One may defend truth without embodying compassion.

The fault lies not in the teaching but in attachment."

The Blessed One recited:

The finger
Points to the moon.

Do not strike
Others with it.

The bowl
Carries medicine.

Do not wield it
As a weapon.

The vision deepened.

An old abbess invited monks from many traditions to share meals in silence before discussing doctrine.

After months of eating together, disagreements remained but hostility diminished.

Asked about her method, she replied:

"It is difficult to hate one whose soup you have shared."

The assembly laughed softly.

The Blessed One praised her wisdom.

Then another symbolic vision unfolded.

The assembly saw a vast cloth torn into many pieces.

Each fragment claimed to be the whole garment.

Tailors argued fiercely over ownership.

A child quietly stitched the pieces together with blue thread.

The completed robe fit everyone.

The Buddha explained:

"The blue thread is compassion.

Without it, knowledge frays into factions."

Sāgaramati then asked:

"Blessed One, how should bodhisattvas respond when confronted by Merchants of Division?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Do not imitate them.

Meet accusation with careful inquiry.

Meet rumor with truthful speech.

Meet hostility with firm but compassionate conduct.

Meet exclusion with generosity.

When correction is necessary, offer it without contempt.

Remember always that those who profit from division remain themselves imprisoned by ignorance."

The vision shifted one final time.

The assembly beheld a great canyon separating two flourishing cities.

For generations the inhabitants shouted insults across the chasm.

An engineer proposed constructing a bridge.

Both sides objected that trade might enrich the other.

At last a group of children secretly built a narrow footbridge from fallen logs.

They crossed to exchange games and stories.

Their parents gradually followed.

Markets reopened.

Marriages united families.

The old insults became unintelligible to later generations.

The bridge remained.

The hatred faded.

The Blessed One smiled.

"Many reconciliations begin with those still untrained in cynicism."

Finally Akṣobhya turned toward Sāgaramati and the assembly and declared:

"The true Merchants of Division traffic not in goods but in alienation.

Their currency is suspicion.

Their profit is mistrust.

Their warehouse is memory clung to without wisdom.

The bodhisattva engages in a different commerce.

He exchanges anger for patience, strangers for friends, fear for understanding, and isolation for interdependence.

This trade enriches every participant without impoverishing another."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Sell not
Contempt.

Buy not
Resentment.

Invest instead

In conversation,

In shared labor,

In truthful speech,

In patient listening.

For the wealth
Of harmony

Cannot be stolen,

And the treasury
Of compassion

Increases

Each time
It is given away.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated profound resolve to heal divisions wherever they arose.

The devas scattered sapphire blossoms over the jeweled fields of Abhirati.

The nāga kings vowed never again to profit from discord but to become patrons of reconciliation.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the entire assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VII — The Hidden Age

Chapter 53

The Builders of Illusion

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Merchants of Division had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, bowed respectfully before the World-Honored One, and asked:

"Blessed One, if there are those who trade in fear and division, there must also be those who construct entire worlds of false appearance. The ancient allegories speak of the Builders of Illusion.

Who are these builders, and what are the cities they erect?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, understand this clearly.

The greatest illusion is not produced by sorcery or extraordinary power.

It is produced by ignorance grasping at impermanent phenomena as though they were permanent, independent, and self-existent.

Whoever strengthens that misunderstanding becomes a Builder of Illusion.

Whoever patiently reveals dependent origination becomes a dismantler of illusion."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then the Blessed One emitted a sapphire ray illuminating innumerable realms.

The assembly beheld architects constructing magnificent palaces.

Painters adorned walls with breathtaking images.

Poets composed inspiring verses.

Actors performed dramas.

Teachers explained philosophy.

Craftsmen fashioned mirrors.

None of these activities were themselves deceptive.

Illusion arose only when beings mistook representation for reality.

The Blessed One declared:

"Skillful appearance may guide toward awakening.

Attachment to appearance obscures awakening."

Then he recited:

The finger
Points.

The moon
Shines.

Blessed is the one

Who admires neither finger
Nor gesture,

But beholds
The moon itself.

The vision shifted.

A prosperous city commissioned an enormous mural depicting perfect harmony among its citizens.

Visitors marveled.

Yet outside the painted wall the poor remained hungry and the lonely remained unseen.

One child quietly asked the mayor,

"Would it not be easier to feed the hungry than repaint them smiling?"

The question spread throughout the city.

Gradually resources shifted from decoration to service.

The mural faded with time.

Compassion endured.

The Blessed One praised the child.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, should practitioners therefore reject beauty?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"No.

Beauty contemplated without attachment may inspire gratitude and serenity.

The problem lies not in beauty but in mistaking appearance for fulfillment.

The lotus blossom reminds beings of awakening.

It does not replace awakening."

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

Admire
The blossom.

Do not imprison
The root.

Respect
The image.

Do not forget
Reality.

The vision broadened.

Among the descendants of the Red Nāgas lived artisans renowned for constructing crystal theaters.

Within them audiences experienced astonishing performances through mirrors, colored light, music, and moving sculptures.

Some spectators left inspired to cultivate virtue.

Others became obsessed with returning repeatedly while neglecting their families and duties.

Seeing this, the chief artisan inscribed above every entrance:

> "May this spectacle remind you to awaken, not distract you from awakening."

The Buddha smiled.

"Wise creators remember responsibility."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly saw an immense city built entirely from mist.

Its towers glittered magnificently at sunrise.

Travelers hurried toward it seeking wealth and fame.

Yet whenever anyone attempted to seize a building, their hands grasped only vapor.

A weary pilgrim finally sat upon the ground and shared his remaining food with another traveler.

Immediately a solid path appeared beneath them.

The Blessed One explained:

"Compassion creates firmer foundations than fantasy."

The devas rejoiced.

Then the vision shifted again.

A philosopher became famous by claiming possession of secret knowledge unavailable to ordinary people.

Crowds gathered.

Fees increased.

Ceremonies multiplied.

One elderly farmer attended a lecture and politely asked,

"Does this teaching make you kinder to your neighbors?"

The philosopher hesitated.

Many listeners quietly departed.

The Blessed One praised the farmer.

"The simplest questions often penetrate elaborate illusions."

Then Sāgaramati reflected:

"Blessed One, can memory itself become illusion?"

Akṣobhya nodded.

"Indeed.

The mind edits the past.

It enlarges triumphs.

It softens failures.

It forgets ordinary blessings while preserving dramatic grievances.

Thus recollection should be examined with mindfulness."

He then recited:

Yesterday's mirror

Also gathers dust.

Polish memory

With honesty,

And regret
Becomes wisdom.

The vision deepened.

An old sculptor carved two statues from the same block of stone.

One represented a victorious king.

The other a kneeling beggar.

Visitors praised the king and ignored the beggar.

The sculptor quietly turned both statues around.

On their backs remained the uncarved stone joining them together.

He remarked:

"The mountain never believed itself divided."

The Blessed One praised this demonstration of emptiness and dependent origination.

Then another symbolic vision unfolded.

The assembly beheld an endless maze whose walls were covered entirely with mirrors.

Travelers wandered for years believing countless corridors surrounded them.

One girl accidentally touched the glass.

It shattered harmlessly.

Beyond lay open meadow and clear sky.

She returned to tell the others.

Many insisted the mirrors were indispensable.

A few followed her into freedom.

The Buddha explained:

"Self-imposed conceptual boundaries often imprison more effectively than physical barriers."

The vision shifted once more.

Within a monastery devoted to Mirror-Like Wisdom, novices were instructed to spend one day each month performing anonymous acts of generosity.

No names were recorded.

No praise was given.

Many initially found the exercise unsatisfying.

Gradually they experienced joy independent of recognition.

The abbot declared:

"When the actor disappears, compassion becomes easier."

The Blessed One smiled.

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, if so much is illusory, what remains trustworthy?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Dependent origination remains reliable.

The Four Noble Truths remain reliable.

Ethical conduct bears wholesome fruit.

Meditation calms the mind.

Wisdom reduces suffering.

Compassion benefits beings.

Impermanence continues.

Emptiness liberates.

Suchness neither deceives nor flatters.

Trust these."

The assembly bowed deeply.

Then the Blessed One manifested one final symbolic vision.

The entire cosmos appeared as a magnificent stage.

Mountains became scenery.

Stars lanterns.

Worlds rotating platforms.

Every being wore masks labeled with names, professions, identities, triumphs, and failures.

As the play concluded, actors removed their masks and bowed to one another with laughter.

No resentment remained.

The audience realized they too had been performers.

The stage dissolved into boundless clear space.

The Buddha explained:

"Roles possess conventional usefulness but ultimate emptiness.

Remember them compassionately without clinging."

Finally Akṣobhya addressed Sāgaramati and the assembly:

"The Builders of Illusion construct palaces of certainty, towers of superiority, walls of identity, and markets of fear.

Yet all these depend upon collective misunderstanding.

The bodhisattva builds differently.

He constructs hospitals instead of hatreds, bridges instead of barriers, schools instead of suspicions, gardens instead of prisons, and opportunities for awakening instead of spectacles of domination.

His architecture is compassion.

His foundation is wisdom.

His blueprint is dependent origination."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Raise not

Only walls of stone.

Raise
Understanding.

Fashion not

Only images.

Fashion
Character.

For every illusion

Eventually fades,

But the merit
Of one selfless deed

Reflects forever

In the clear mirror

Of Suchness.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated profound insight into the illusory nature of conceptual constructions and renewed their commitment to build conditions favorable to awakening.

The devas scattered sapphire blossoms throughout Abhirati.

The nāga kings contemplated the empty nature of identities and appearances.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the whole assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VII — The Hidden Age

Chapter 54

The Sleep of Humanity

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the stainless Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Builders of Illusion had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, bowed deeply before the World-Honored One, and respectfully inquired:

"Blessed One, the old allegories speak of an age in which humanity fell into a great sleep. Some have interpreted this as literal enchantment, while others say it refers to a spiritual condition.

What is this Sleep of Humanity according to the Dharma?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, beings have wandered through beginningless saṃsāra under the influence of ignorance.

This ignorance resembles sleep.

Dreams appear real while they are experienced.

One pursues pleasure, flees danger, and clings to imagined identities.

Upon awakening, one realizes that much suffering arose from misperception.

Therefore the Sleep of Humanity is not imposed by an external sorcerer.

It is the ordinary condition of minds obscured by greed, hatred, and delusion."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then the Blessed One emitted a sapphire ray that illuminated the Human Realm across many ages.

The assembly saw bustling cities where people hurried constantly.

Markets opened before dawn.

Courts argued late into the night.

Ships crossed seas.

Caravans traversed deserts.

Schools taught countless subjects.

Temples held elaborate ceremonies.

Yet amid all this activity, few paused to examine their own minds.

The Buddha declared:

"Restlessness often disguises unconsciousness."

Then he recited:

Eyes may open

While wisdom sleeps.

Feet may travel

While intention wanders.

Speech may flourish

While understanding slumbers.

Awaken
Not only the body,

But awareness.

The vision shifted.

In one village lived a bellmaker named Candrapāla.

Every sunrise he rang a great bronze bell.

People assumed it marked the beginning of work.

Only after his death did they discover the inscription hidden inside:

"May all who hear awaken from forgetfulness."

His apprentices continued ringing the bell with renewed understanding.

The Blessed One praised him.

"The ordinary sound becomes Dharma when joined to wholesome intention."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, how does this sleep arise?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"It begins subtly.

One postpones generosity until tomorrow.

One repeats anger until it feels natural.

One follows custom without examination.

One mistakes habit for identity.

One stops asking whether conduct reduces suffering.

Eventually awareness dulls.

The dream deepens."

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

The deepest sleep

Often begins

With one unnecessary
Yawn

Of mindfulness neglected.

The vision broadened.

The descendants of the Red Nāgas observed neighboring communities trapped in endless cycles of resentment.

Rather than intervene through force, several bodhisattvas established tea houses where strangers sat together before discussing disputes.

No judgments occurred during the first cup.

No negotiations during the second.

Only after the third were disagreements addressed.

Remarkably, many quarrels dissolved before formal debate even began.

The proprietors hung a simple sign:

"Conversation awakens where accusation sleeps."

The Blessed One smiled.

"Hospitality often succeeds where argument fails."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly beheld an immense city in which every inhabitant slept while continuing ordinary activities.

Merchants traded.

Judges pronounced verdicts.

Soldiers marched.

Parents spoke with children.

Artists painted.

Yet all had closed eyes.

Only a little girl wandered fully awake.

She gently removed pebbles from the road so sleepers would not stumble.

When asked later why she performed such small tasks, she answered:

"I cannot wake everyone today, but I may lessen tomorrow's bruises."

The Blessed One praised her.

"Compassion does not wait for universal enlightenment before acting."

The devas rejoiced.

Then the vision shifted again.

A celebrated philosopher traveled proclaiming that awakening consisted merely in acquiring increasingly complex theories.

An elderly gardener invited him to help transplant seedlings.

The philosopher reluctantly agreed.

Hours later, covered in soil, he remarked:

"I have thought little today."

The gardener answered,

"And noticed much."

The philosopher laughed and returned regularly.

Years afterward he wrote:

> "The roots taught what abstractions concealed."

The Blessed One praised this transformation.

Then Sāgaramati reflected:

"Blessed One, can entire civilizations dream collectively?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Indeed.

Communities may normalize greed.

Nations may normalize fear.

Institutions may normalize injustice.

Generations may inherit assumptions without inquiry.

Thus collective dreams arise through shared habits.

Yet one awakened practitioner influences many, just as one lamp lights numerous others without diminishing itself."

The Blessed One recited:

The sleeping village

Needs only

One rooster.

The dark hall

Needs only

One candle.

Guard therefore

Your own awareness,

And others
May awaken nearby.

The vision deepened.

A monastery maintained an unusual discipline.

Every hour, regardless of activity, a wooden fish drum sounded once.

Monks stopped walking.

Scribes lifted brushes.

Cooks paused stirring pots.

Children ceased games.

For three breaths everyone observed body, feeling, mind, and phenomena.

Travelers initially considered the interruptions inconvenient.

After several days they discovered unusual clarity.

Many adopted similar practices elsewhere.

The Buddha declared:

"Brief recollection repeated consistently surpasses occasional enthusiasm."

Then another symbolic vision unfolded.

The assembly saw countless beings wandering through a magnificent dream palace.

Rooms contained honors, pleasures, grievances, victories, and fears.

Some refused to leave favorite chambers.

Others fled terrifying corridors only to enter similar ones.

At the palace center stood a simple blue door labeled:

Observe.

Few noticed it.

Those who entered awoke peacefully beneath open sky.

The Blessed One explained:

"Mindfulness is the doorway hidden in plain sight."

Sāgaramati then asked:

"World-Honored One, how should bodhisattvas awaken sleepers without violence?"

Akṣobhya replied:

"Gently.

Do not strike the dreamer.

Offer examples rather than coercion.

Ask skillful questions.

Model ethical conduct.

Serve quietly.

Some awaken suddenly.

Most awaken gradually.

Patience belongs among the highest perfections."

The assembly bowed.

Then the vision shifted one final time.

A mother tucked her child into bed beneath a crimson evening sky.

Before extinguishing the lamp she whispered:

"When morning comes, remember your dreams kindly, but do not mistake them for the day."

Across countless rebirths, that child later recalled the sentence whenever attachment threatened to overwhelm discernment.

The Blessed One smiled.

"Thus one compassionate phrase may accompany consciousness through many lives."

Finally Akṣobhya addressed Sāgaramati and the entire assembly:

"The Sleep of Humanity is neither curse nor condemnation.

It is the ordinary ignorance from which Buddhas awaken.

Do not despise those still dreaming.

Stand beside them as dawn approaches.

Sound the bell of mindfulness.

Sweep the path of obstacles.

Offer water to the weary.

When they awaken, greet them not with superiority but with friendship.

For you too wandered long before opening your eyes."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Sleep passes.

Dreams dissolve.

Morning arrives

Without resentment.

So too

Ignorance yields

To patient wisdom.

Therefore awaken gently,

Walk compassionately,

And ring each day

The bell

Of remembering

The Buddha-Nature

Already present

In every being.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated profound patience toward those still wandering in delusion.

The devas scattered sapphire blossoms across the jeweled fields of Abhirati.

The nāga kings renewed their vows to awaken beings through compassion rather than fear.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the whole assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VII — The Hidden Age

Chapter 55

The Secret Bodhisattvas

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Sleep of Humanity had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, bowed deeply before the World-Honored One, and respectfully asked:

"Blessed One, if many beings wander through ignorance, surely there must also be those who quietly labor for awakening without seeking recognition. The old allegories speak of Secret Bodhisattvas hidden among ordinary people.

Who are these bodhisattvas, and how may they be known?"

The Blessed One smiled.

"Sāgaramati, they are known precisely because they do not seek to be known.

The Secret Bodhisattva does not hide through deception but through humility.

Such a one may wear patched robes or royal garments, work as a farmer or physician, dwell in monasteries or marketplaces, yet never advertise virtue.

The world often overlooks them because it expects awakening to arrive with spectacle.

The Dharma frequently arrives carrying water, sweeping floors, or listening patiently."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then the Blessed One emitted a sapphire ray that illuminated innumerable worlds.

The assembly beheld grand monuments erected to celebrated heroes.

Nearby, unnoticed laborers repaired roads before dawn so strangers might travel safely.

History preserved the names of kings.

The roads preserved the lives of countless unknown travelers.

The Buddha declared:

"The merit of hidden compassion often exceeds the fame of visible achievement."

Then he recited:

The loud bell
Calls attention.

The hidden foundation
Supports the temple.

Seek not only
The ringing,

But also
The stone beneath.

The vision shifted.

In one drought-stricken valley lived an elderly woman named Sucīlā.

Each night she secretly filled empty water jars left outside the homes of widows too frail to reach the distant well.

No one knew her identity.

When villagers eventually discovered the truth, they attempted to honor her publicly.

She declined, saying:

"The jars required filling, not my name."

After her passing, many imitated the practice.

The Blessed One praised her before the assembly.

"Thus anonymous generosity multiplies."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, why conceal good deeds that might inspire others?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Concealment is not always required.

Public virtue may encourage imitation.

Yet when praise becomes nourishment for conceit, hidden service protects the practitioner.

The wise discern circumstances carefully."

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

If applause
Strengthens compassion,

Accept it lightly.

If applause
Strengthens pride,

Step quietly
Into the shade.

The vision broadened.

Among the descendants of the Red Nāgas lived a stonemason called Ratnagupta.

He carved foundations for monasteries but always placed his finest work beneath ground where no visitor would ever see it.

An apprentice protested:

"Master, why bury your greatest skill?"

Ratnagupta replied:

"Because the unseen stones bear the visible walls."

The apprentice remembered these words throughout his life.

The Blessed One smiled.

"The Dharma likewise rests upon many invisible acts."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly saw a mountain whose summit glittered with snow.

Pilgrims praised its beauty.

Few noticed the hidden roots extending deep below the valleys, holding soil together and feeding springs.

Without those unseen supports the mountain would crumble.

The Buddha explained:

"So too the world is sustained by unnoticed kindness."

The devas rejoiced.

Then the vision shifted again.

A prosperous city elected judges through elaborate examinations.

Unknown to all, the cleaner responsible for preparing the examination hall quietly removed insulting graffiti each morning so candidates would begin the day peacefully rather than angrily.

His task seemed insignificant.

Yet over decades his simple act prevented innumerable resentments.

When asked why he bothered, he answered:

"A clear wall invites a clearer mind."

The Blessed One praised him.

Then Sāgaramati reflected:

"Blessed One, may one recognize a Secret Bodhisattva by miraculous signs?"

Akṣobhya laughed softly.

"If miracles are expected, many bodhisattvas will remain invisible.

Observe instead whether suffering decreases around a person.

Notice whether fear softens.

Whether strangers become friends.

Whether generosity spreads.

Whether patience grows contagious.

These are greater miracles than walking through the air."

The assembly rejoiced.

The Blessed One recited:

Healed resentment

Outshines levitation.

Shared bread

Surpasses spectacle.

One reconciled family

Exceeds
Many wonders.

The vision deepened.

A wandering physician refused payment from impoverished patients.

When wealthy patrons insisted upon lavish rewards, she redirected the gifts toward village clinics.

Only after her death did records reveal that she had quietly financed hospitals across seven regions.

People marveled.

The physician herself had considered the matter ordinary.

The Buddha declared:

"Ordinariness perfected through compassion becomes extraordinary."

Then another symbolic vision unfolded.

The assembly saw innumerable lamps suspended beneath the earth where no eye could behold them.

Above ground, forests flourished unexpectedly during moonless nights.

Travelers wondered why they never lost the path.

The Blessed One explained:

"Hidden merit illumines conditions beyond immediate perception."

Sāgaramati then asked:

"World-Honored One, do Secret Bodhisattvas know they are bodhisattvas?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Some do.

Many do not.

Some simply respond naturally to suffering with kindness.

Others consciously vow to liberate beings.

Titles matter little.

Bodhicitta matters greatly."

The vision shifted once more.

In a remote monastery novices were assigned an unusual examination.

Rather than reciting scripture, they spent one month serving in nearby villages without revealing their religious affiliation.

Upon returning, the abbot asked only:

"Did anyone suffer less because you were present?"

No further grading occurred.

The Blessed One praised this practice.

"Compassion is the highest credential."

Then another scene appeared.

An orphan boy carried food each winter to an irritable recluse living beyond the fields.

The recluse seldom expressed gratitude.

Villagers mocked the child's persistence.

Years later, after the old man's death, hidden manuscripts were discovered preserving forgotten teachings that otherwise would have vanished.

The boy inherited nothing material.

Yet his patience had preserved wisdom for future generations.

The Buddha smiled.

"The fruits of compassion often ripen unseen."

Finally Akṣobhya manifested one last symbolic vision.

The assembly beheld a vast tapestry depicting the history of worlds.

Bright golden threads represented celebrated figures remembered by every generation.

Closer inspection revealed that the tapestry remained intact only because of countless nearly invisible blue threads woven underneath.

Without them the entire design unraveled.

The Blessed One explained:

"The blue threads are the Secret Bodhisattvas.

History rarely records them.

The Dharma never forgets them."

Turning toward Sāgaramati and the assembly, Akṣobhya declared:

"Therefore seek not merely famous teachers or miraculous beings.

Honor also the quiet nurse, the honest merchant, the patient parent, the forgiving prisoner, the diligent cleaner, the truthful judge, the anonymous donor, the careful farmer, the compassionate child.

Any of these may surpass kings in merit.

The Secret Bodhisattva transforms the world without demanding that the world notice."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Walk softly.

Give freely.

Teach patiently.

Forgive quickly.

Leave behind

Clear paths,

Full bowls,

Healed hearts,

And wiser children.

If no monument
Bears your name,

Yet suffering
Has lessened,

The Buddhas

Already know

Where to bow.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated profound aspiration to practice humility joined with tireless compassion.

The devas scattered sapphire blossoms over the jeweled plains of Abhirati.

The nāga kings renewed vows to serve without seeking recognition.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the whole assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.

Book VII — The Hidden Age

Chapter 56

The Seeds of Awakening

Thus did the Blessed Akṣobhya continue his sublime discourse before the immeasurable assembly abiding in the Pure Land of Abhirati.

When the teaching concerning the Secret Bodhisattvas had concluded, the Bodhisattva Sāgaramati arose from his lotus seat, bowed deeply before the World-Honored One, and respectfully inquired:

"Blessed One, if countless beings remain asleep within saṃsāra, and if hidden bodhisattvas labor quietly among them, by what means does awakening first arise? What are the earliest signs that a mind is turning toward liberation?"

The Blessed One replied:

"Sāgaramati, awakening rarely begins with thunder.

More often it begins with a question honestly asked, a kindness unexpectedly received, a moment of stillness amid confusion, or a recognition that suffering need not continue forever.

These are the Seeds of Awakening.

Though small in appearance, they contain forests beyond imagination."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then the Blessed One emitted a sapphire ray that illuminated innumerable worlds.

The assembly saw children asking difficult questions, prisoners forgiving old enemies, scholars admitting ignorance, rulers listening to criticism, merchants choosing honesty over profit, and strangers helping one another during storms.

Each simple act shone like a blue seed upon the earth.

The Blessed One declared:

"No wholesome intention is ever wasted.

Every sincere aspiration conditions future liberation."

Then he recited:

The oak
Sleeps within
The acorn.

The lotus
Sleeps within
The seed.

The Buddha
Sleeps not,

But waits patiently

Within obscured awareness.

The vision shifted.

In a small farming village lived a boy named Sumitra.

One day he found an injured bird by the roadside.

Though poor, he carried it home, tended its wounds, and released it when healed.

Years later, when asked why he first entered monastic life, he answered:

"I wished to understand why helping that bird made my heart lighter."

The Blessed One praised him.

"Compassion often precedes philosophy."

Then Sāgaramati asked:

"World-Honored One, may painful experiences also become seeds?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Indeed.

Disappointment may reveal impermanence.

Illness may awaken gratitude.

Failure may soften pride.

Loss may deepen empathy.

Even grief, rightly understood, becomes fertile soil.

The bodhisattva therefore transforms adversity rather than worshiping it."

The Blessed One then spoke in verse:

Rain falls

Upon thorn
And lotus alike.

The wise gardener

Learns
Which seeds
To cultivate.

The vision broadened.

Among the descendants of the Red Nāgas there arose a custom of planting blue flowers wherever reconciliation occurred.

Two families ending a generations-long feud planted one blossom.

A merchant forgiving a debtor planted another.

Communities gradually became covered with gardens whose beauty reminded all who passed that peace had tangible consequences.

Travelers carried the tradition elsewhere.

Soon entire regions celebrated restored friendship by planting living memorials instead of erecting monuments to victory.

The Buddha smiled.

"Visible symbols wisely chosen nourish invisible virtues."

Then another symbolic vision appeared.

The assembly beheld an immense field containing innumerable seeds.

Some rested in rich soil.

Some beneath stone.

Some in drought.

Some beside rivers.

Many observers concluded that only the already flourishing seeds possessed value.

An old gardener patiently watered every part of the field.

Centuries later unexpected blossoms emerged from places long considered barren.

The Blessed One explained:

"The practitioner never abandons any sentient being as hopeless."

The devas rejoiced.

Then the vision shifted again.

A renowned philosopher traveled the world debating profound doctrines.

During one journey he accepted lodging from an illiterate widow.

Before sleeping she quietly divided her only loaf of bread, giving the larger half to a hungry stranger.

The philosopher later confessed:

"That single meal instructed me more deeply than many arguments."

The Blessed One praised the widow.

"Conduct ripens understanding."

Then Sāgaramati reflected:

"Blessed One, how should one protect the first stirrings of bodhicitta?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"As a gardener protects tender shoots.

Associate with virtuous friends.

Study wisely.

Meditate consistently.

Avoid nourishing resentment.

Practice generosity even in small matters.

Do not demand immediate perfection.

Patient cultivation yields enduring fruit."

He then recited:

Guard
The smallest flame

From needless wind.

For tomorrow

It may become

The lamp

Guiding multitudes.

The vision deepened.

Within a monastery devoted to Mirror-Like Wisdom, every novice received a clay pot filled with soil upon ordination.

No explanation accompanied the gift.

Only after many years did the abbot reveal its meaning:

"Your practice has always resembled this vessel.

Invisible roots developed long before visible flowers appeared."

The monks treasured the lesson.

The Blessed One smiled.

Then another symbolic vision unfolded.

The assembly saw a vast orchard stretching beyond sight.

Every tree bore fruit except one seemingly barren sapling.

Impatient observers urged its removal.

An elderly gardener objected.

He loosened the surrounding earth and discovered stones compressing its roots.

After clearing them and adding water, the tree eventually produced sweeter fruit than all the others.

The Buddha explained:

"Many beings require the removal of obstacles rather than condemnation."

Sāgaramati then asked:

"World-Honored One, may even mistaken beliefs become conditions leading toward awakening?"

Akṣobhya answered:

"Yes, when honestly examined.

Many begin practice seeking security, reputation, mystical power, or relief from fear.

Through diligent cultivation they gradually discover deeper motivations.

The Dharma transforms aspiration rather than demanding immediate purity."

The assembly rejoiced.

Then the vision shifted once more.

A little girl habitually left crumbs outside her family's door each morning for unseen birds.

When questioned, she simply answered:

"They may be hungry before I awaken."

Generations later her descendants established public kitchens serving travelers without charge.

The original gesture had become institution.

The Blessed One declared:

"Seeds ripen according to conditions far beyond immediate observation."

Then another remarkable vision appeared.

The assembly saw every act of kindness performed throughout the Human Realm becoming a tiny sapphire seed carried by invisible winds.

These seeds settled in hearts prepared by suffering, curiosity, friendship, or reflection.

Some sprouted immediately.

Others remained dormant for lifetimes.

None disappeared.

The Buddha explained:

"Karma preserves wholesome potential with astonishing patience."

Finally Akṣobhya manifested one last symbolic vision.

The deserts of the Red World appeared once more.

Across their surface lay countless grains of crimson sand.

Among them, almost impossible to distinguish, rested tiny blue seeds.

A gentle rain fell.

Within moments innumerable lotus blossoms emerged, transforming barren plains into luminous gardens stretching to every horizon.

Turning toward Sāgaramati and the assembly, the Blessed One declared:

"So it is with bodhicitta.

Entire ages may seem barren.

Violence may appear victorious.

Greed may dominate institutions.

Fear may cloud perception.

Yet hidden within ordinary acts of honesty, generosity, patience, inquiry, and compassion lie the Seeds of Awakening.

When conditions ripen, they bloom beyond calculation.

Therefore despise no small virtue and abandon no being.

Every Buddha once appeared to the world as a seed unnoticed by most."

Then the Blessed One concluded with these verses:

Plant kindness

Before certainty.

Plant listening

Before judgment.

Plant generosity

Before abundance.

Plant patience

Before success.

For the field
Of saṃsāra

Awaits only

The careful gardener

To reveal

That beneath
Every desert

Sleeps

The possibility

Of a lotus.

When these words had been spoken, innumerable bodhisattvas generated unshakable confidence in the universal potential for awakening.

The devas showered sapphire blossoms over the jeweled fields of Abhirati.

The nāga kings renewed their vows to cultivate wholesome causes in every realm they visited.

The Bodhisattva Sāgaramati bowed before Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and the whole assembly rejoiced in the immeasurable Dharma.